

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY ANTHOLOGY

SPRING-
SUMMER
1976

\$1.95 UK 55p, AUS-NZ \$1.25

VOLUME 31

3 SHORT NOVELS

REX STOUT **ED McBRIN**
 (and **HERO WOLFE**) **HOLLY ROTH**

11 SHORT STORIES

John D. MacDonald	Isaac Asimov
Ellery Queen	Robert L. Fish
Gerald Kersh	Berkely Mather
William Bankier	Alan R. Young
Simon Troy	E.X. Ferrars
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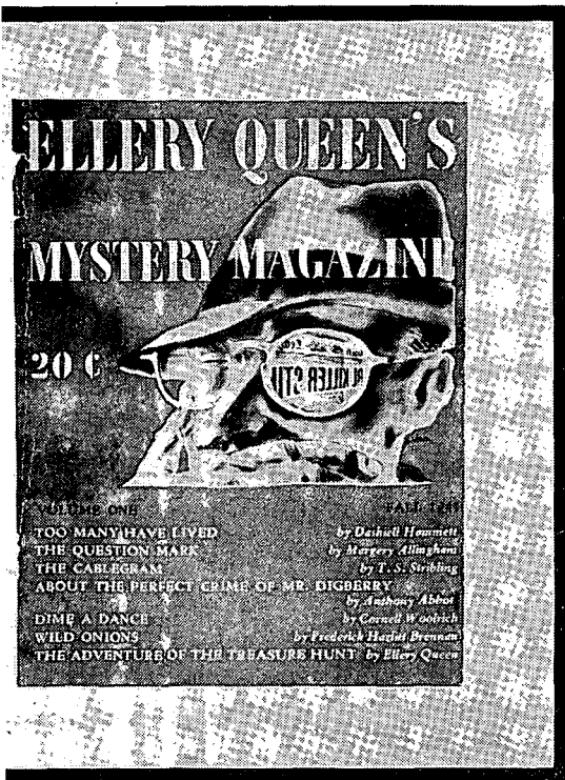
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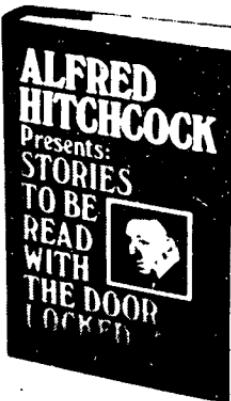
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ELLERY QUEEN'S ANTHOLOGY

SPRING-
SUMMER
1976

EDITED BY

"Ellery Queen"

DAVIS PUBLICATIONS, INC., 229 PARK AVE. SOUTH
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10003

FIRST PRINTING

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 59-13341
Printed in the U. S. A.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader:

Once more we are indebted to Anatole Broyard. We find our text in another of his reviews, this one in "The New York Times" of September 16, 1974 discussing V. A. Pritchett's book titled *The Camberwell Beauty and Other Stories*.

Mr. Broyard wrote: "To tell a good story" is a condescending expression in the world of serious writing. It might be acceptable at a party or in a bar, but not in print. Instead of 'plucking out the heart of my mystery,' as Hamlet put it, most of the better-known short story writers now prefer to *present* the mystery of character. The story gives you a few clues and the rest is up to you. Reading fiction is no longer a passive or lazy business . . .

"Whether these stories 'succeed' or not, most of them are 'readable' at the very least. Perhaps this readability derives from their 'mystery'—even if we never come to understand it. I think I would rather be puzzled by my fellow creatures than see an author 'lay the brain upon the board / and pick the acrid colors out'."

Once again we point out that the detective story is "different"—and *vive la différence!* The detective story makes no bones about its purpose: it is proud to "tell a good story," and the "gooder" the better. We in the genre do not consider it at all "condescending" to be told that we tell a good story. In our naive fashion we still consider it a compliment.

Difference Number Two: the detective story not only "presents" a mystery, it "presents" a solution to the mystery. This, we think, offers readers a more rewarding and satisfying experience. True, on rare occasions, detective stories end without an explanation of the mystery. But this is the exception that proves the ratiocinative rule.

Difference Number Three: perhaps reading so-called serious fiction has been a "passive or lazy business." In detective stories the

reader has always been given "a few clues and the rest" has always been "up to you." Thus, the reading of detective stories has never been "a passive or lazy business"—and never will be.

And Difference Number Four: if stories that present a mystery but not a solution are "readable," surely detective stories that present not only a mystery but also a solution are, at the very least, "more readable." If readers "never come to understand" a detective story, its readability would become zero, and the mystery genre would not merely fade away, it would die. Mystery writers do not exactly "lay the brain upon the board," but they do make sense out of chaos, and mystery readers would not want it any other way.

ELLERY QUEEN



Rex Stout

Method Three For Murder

Here's the way it started: Archie Goodwin had just quit his job—yes, left the employ of Nero Wolfe for the thirtieth time, or maybe it was the fortieth. And while Archie was departing from Wolfe's premises, at 918 West 35th Street, New York City, even before Archie had reached the sidewalk in front of Nero's house, a pretty girl handed Archie a case on a silver-plated platter (fee: \$50). But then the case turned into one of murder and Nero showed his true colors: Archie and his client were in a pickle; Nero had never tried to do a job without Archie's help; so why should Archie try to do one (the first on his own) without Nero's help? And then, of course, the client ("somewhat level-headed") had chosen Method Three—always a perilous procedure...

An engrossing short novel complete in this anthology...

Detectives: NERO WOLFE and ARCHIE GOODWIN

When I first set eyes on Mira Holt, as I opened the front door and she was coming up the seven steps to the stoop, she was a problem, though only a minor one compared to what followed.

At the moment I was unemployed. During the years I have worked for Nero Wolfe and lived under his roof, I have quit and been fired about the same number of times—say, thirty or forty. Mostly we have been merely letting off steam, but sometimes we have meant it, more or less, and that Monday evening in September I was really fed up. The main dish at dinner had been pork stewed in beer, which both Wolfe and Fritz know I can get along without, and we had left the dining room and crossed the hall to the office, and Fritz had brought coffee and Wolfe had

poured it, and I had said, "By the way, I told Anderson I'd phone and confirm his appointment for tomorrow morning."

And Wolfe had said, "No. Cancel it." He picked up the book he was on, John Gunther's *Inside Russia Today*.

I sat in my working chair and looked across his desk at him. Since he weighs a seventh of a ton he always looks big, but when he's being obnoxious he looks even bigger. "Do you suppose it's possible," I asked, "that that pork has a bloating effect?"

"No, indeed," he said, and opened the book.

If I had been a camel and the book had been a straw you could have heard my spine crack. He knew darned well he shouldn't have opened it until we had finished with coffee. I put my cup down. "I am aware," I said, "that you are sitting pretty. The bank balance is fat enough for months of paying Fritz and Theodore and me, and buying pork and beer in car lots, and adding more orchids to the ten thousand you've already got. I'll even grant that a private detective has a right to refuse to take a case with or without a reason. But as I told you before dinner, this Anderson is known to me, and he asked me as a personal favor to get him fifteen minutes with you, and I told him to come at eleven o'clock tomorrow morning. If you're determined not to work because your tax bracket is already too high, okay, all you have to do is tell him no. He'll be here at eleven."

He was holding the book open and his eyes were on it, but he spoke. "You know quite well, Archie, that I must be consulted on appointments. Did you owe this man a favor?"

"I do now that he asked me for one and I said yes."

"Did you owe him one before?"

"No."

"Then you are committed but I am not. Since I wouldn't take the job it would waste his time and mine. Phone him not to come. Tell him I have other engagements."

So I quit. I admit that on some other occasions my quitting had been merely a threat, to jolt him into seeing reason, but not that time. When a mule plants its feet a certain way there's no use trying to budge it. I swiveled, got my memo pad, wrote on it, yanked the sheet off, got up and crossed to his desk, and handed him the sheet.

"That's Anderson's number," I told him. "If you're too busy to phone him not to come, Fritz can. I'm through. I'll stay with friends tonight and come tomorrow for my stuff."

His eyes had left the book to glare at me. "Pfui," he said.

"I agree," I said. "Absolutely." I turned and marched out. I do not say that as I got my hat from the rack in the hall my course was clearly mapped for the next twenty years, or even twenty hours. Wolfe owned the house but not everything in it, for the furniture in my room on the third floor had been bought and paid for by me. That would have to wait until I found a place to move it to, but I would get my clothes and other items tomorrow, and would I come for them before eleven o'clock and learn from Fritz whether a visitor named Anderson was expected, or would it be better strategy to come in the afternoon and learn if Anderson had been admitted and given his fifteen minutes?

Facing that problem as I pulled the door open, I was immediately confronted by another one. A female was coming up the seven steps to the stoop.

I couldn't greet her and ask her business, since it was a cinch she would say she wanted to see Nero Wolfe and I couldn't carry on with a job I no longer held by returning to the office to ask Wolfe if he would receive a caller. Anyway I wouldn't. I couldn't step aside and let her enter by the door I had opened with no questions asked, since there was a possibility that she was one of the various people who had it in for Wolfe, and while I might have considered shooting him myself I didn't want to get him plugged by a total stranger. So I crossed the sill, pulled the door shut, sidestepped to pass her, and was starting down the steps when my sleeve was caught and jerked.

"Hey," she said, "aren't you Archie Goodwin?"

My eyes slanted down to hers. "You're guessing," I said.

"I am not. I've seen you at the Flamingo. You're not very polite, shutting the door in my face." She spoke in jerks, as if she wasn't sure she had enough breath. "I want to see Nero Wolfe."

"This is his house. Ring the bell."

"But I want to see you too. Let me in. Take me in."

My eyes had adjusted enough to the poor light to see that she was young, attractive, and hyped. She had on a cap with a beak. In normal circumstances it would have been a pleasure to escort her into the front room and go and badger Wolfe into seeing her, but as things stood I didn't even consider it.

"I'm sorry," I said, "but I don't work here any more. I just quit. I am now on my way to bum a bed for the night. You'll have to ring the bell, but I should warn you that in Mr. Wolfe's present

mood there's not a chance. You might as well skip it. If your trouble is urgent you ought to—"

"I'm not in trouble."

"Good. You're lucky."

She touched my sleeve. "I don't believe it. That you've quit."

"I do. Would I say so if I hadn't? Running the risk that you're a journalist and tomorrow there will be a front-page spread, 'Archie Goodwin, the famous private detective, has severed his connection with Nero Wolfe, also a detective, and it is thought—'"

"Shut up!" She was close to me, gripping my arm. She let loose and backed up a step. "I beg your pardon. I seem to be . . . you think Nero Wolfe wouldn't see me?"

"I don't think. I know."

"Anyway I want to see you too. For what I want I guess you would be better than him. I want some advice—no, not advice exactly, I want to consult you. I'll pay cash, fifty dollars. Can't we go inside?"

Naturally I was uplifted. Since I had left Wolfe, and since there was no other outfit in New York I would work for, my only possible program was to set up for myself, and before I even got down to the sidewalk here was a pretty girl offering me fifty bucks just for consultation.

"I'm afraid not," I told her, "since I no longer belong here. If that's your taxi waiting that will do fine, especially with the driver gone." A glance had shown me that there was no one behind the wheel of the cab at the curb. Probably, having been told to wait for her, he had beat it to Al's diner at the corner of Tenth Avenue, which was popular with hackies.

She shook her head. "I don't—" she began, and let it hang. She glanced around. "Why not here? It shouldn't take very long—I just want you to help me win a bet." She moved, descended two steps, and sat on the landing, swaying a little as she bent. "Have a seat."

We were still on Wolfe's premises, but he rarely used the outdoors part and after she paid me I could slip a buck under the door for rent. I sat down beside her, not crowding. I had often sat there watching the neighborhood kids play stoop ball.

"Do I pay in advance?" she asked.

"No, thanks, I'll trust you. What's the bet about?"

"Well . . ." She was squinting at me in the dim light. "I had an argument with a friend of mine. She said there were ninety-three

women cab drivers in New York, and she thought it was dangerous because sometimes things happen in cabs that it takes a man to handle, and I said things like that can happen anywhere just as well as in cabs, and we had an argument, and she bet me fifty dollars she could prove something dangerous could happen in a cab that couldn't happen anywhere else. She thought up some things, but I made her admit they could happen other places too, and then she said what if a woman cab driver left her empty cab to go into a building for something, and when she came back there was a dead woman in the cab? She claimed that won the bet, and the trouble was I didn't know enough about what you're supposed to do when you find a dead body. That's what I want you to tell me. I'm sure she's wrong. And I'll pay you fifty dollars."

I was squinting back at her. "You don't look it," I stated.

"I don't look what?"

"Loony. Two things. First, the same thing could happen if she were driving a private car instead of a cab, and why didn't you tell her that? Second, where's the danger? She merely finds a phone and notifies the police. It would be a nuisance, but you said dangerous."

"Oh. Of course." She bit her lip. "I left something out. It's not her cab. She has a friend who is a cab driver, and she wanted to see what driving a cab was like, and her friend let her take it. So she can't notify the police because her friend broke some law when she let her take the cab, and she broke one too, driving a cab without a license, so it wouldn't have been the same if she had been driving a private car. And the only way I can win the bet is to prove that it wouldn't be dangerous."

"She doesn't know how the dead woman got in the cab or anything about it. All she has to do is get the body out of the cab, but that might be dangerous unless she did it just right, and that's what I want you to tell me so I won't make some awful mistake—I mean when I tell my friend why it wouldn't be dangerous. Things like where would she go to—to take it out of the cab, and would she have to wait until late at night, and how would she make sure there were no traces left in the cab." She bit her lip again, and her fingers were curled to make fists. "Things like that."

"I see." I had stopped squinting. "What's your name?"

She shook her head. "You don't have to know. I'm just consulting you." She stuck her fingers in the pocket of her jacket, a

grayish number with pointed lapels that had seen wear, came out with a purse, and opened it.

I reached to snap it shut. "That can wait. I certainly wouldn't take your money without knowing your name. Of course you can make one up."

"Why should I?" She gestured. "All right. My name is Mira Holt. Mira with an I." She opened the purse again.

"Hold it," I told her. "A couple of questions. The dead woman she finds in the cab—does she recognize her?"

"No, how could she?"

"She could if she knew her when she was alive."

"She didn't."

"Good. That helps. You say she left her empty cab to go into a building for something. For what?"

"Oh, just anything. I don't know. That doesn't matter."

"It might, but if you don't know you can't tell me. I want to make it clear, Miss Holt, that I accept without question all that you have told me. Since I am a trained detective I am chronically suspicious, but you are so frank and intelligent and pleasing to look at that I wouldn't dream of doubting you. A man who was sap enough to size you up wrong might even suspect you of feeding him a phony, and go and take a look in that taxi, but not me. I don't even ask you where the driver is, because I assume he has gone to the corner for a ham on rye and a cuppa coffee. In short, I trust you fully. That's understood?"

Her lips were tight. She was probably frowning, but the beak of her cap screened her brow. "I guess so." She wasn't at all sure. "But maybe—if that's how you feel—maybe it would be better just to—"

"No. It's better like this. Much better. About this situation your friend thought up and claims she won the bet, it has many aspects. You say you didn't know enough about what you're supposed to do when you find a dead body. First and foremost, you're supposed to notify the police immediately. That goes for everybody, but it's a must for a private detective—me, for instance—if he wants to keep his license. Is that clear?"

"Yes." She nodded. "I see."

"Also you're not supposed to touch the body or anything near it. Also you're not supposed to leave it unguarded, but that's not so important because you may have to in order to call a cop. As for your idea that all she has to do is get the body out of the cab, and

where would she go to ditch it, and would she have to wait until late at night, and so on, I admit it has possibilities and I could make a lot of practical suggestions. But you have to show that it could be done without danger, and that's too big an order. That's what licks you. Forget it. However, your friend hasn't won the bet. She was to produce a situation showing that a woman cab driver runs special risks as a hackie, and in this case the danger comes because she was *not* driving the cab."

"That's no help. You know very well—"

"Shut up. I beg your pardon."

Her fingers were curled into fists again. "You said you could make some practical suggestions."

"I was carried away. The idea of disposing of a dead body is fascinating as long as it's only an idea. By the way, I took one thing for granted that I shouldn't have—that your friend specified that the woman had died by violence. If she could have died of natural causes—"

"No. She had been stabbed. There was a knife, the handle of a knife..."

"Then it's impossible. A hackie letting someone else drive his cab is a misdemeanor, and so is driving a cab without a license, but driving off with a dead body with a knife sticking in it, and dumping it somewhere, and not reporting it—that's a felony. Good for at least a year and probably more."

She opened a fist to grip my arm, leaning to me. "But not if she did it right! Not if no one ever knew! I told you one thing wrong—she *did* recognize her! She *did* know her when she was alive! So she can't—"

"Hold it," I growled. "Give me some money quick. Pay me. A dollar bill, five—don't sit and stare. See that police car? If it goes on by—no, it's stopping—pay me!"

She was going to panic. She started up, but my hand on her shoulder stopped her and held her down. She opened the purse and took out folded bills without fumbling, and I took them and put them in my pocket. "Staring is okay," I told her, not too loud. "People stare at police cars. Stay put and keep your mouth shut. I'm going to take a look. Naturally I'm curious."

That was perfectly true. I *was* curious. The prowler car had stopped alongside the taxi, and a cop, not the one who was driving, had got out and circled around to the door of the taxi on his side and was opening it as I reached the sidewalk. When you have a

reputation for cheek you should live up to it, so I crossed to the door on my side and pulled it open. The seat was empty, but in front of it was a spread of brown canvas held up by whatever was under it.

The cop, lifting a corner of the canvas, snarled at me, "Back up, you," and I retreated half a step, but he hadn't said to close the door, so I had a good view when he pulled the canvas off. More light would have helped, but there was enough to see that it was a woman, or had been, and that the knife whose handle was perpendicular to her ribs was all the way in.

"My God," I said with feeling.

"Shut that door!" the cop barked. "No, don't touch it!"

"I already have."

"I saw you. Beat it! No! What's your name?"

"Goodwin. Archie Goodwin. This is Nero Wolfe's house, and—"

"I know it is. And I know about you. Is this your cab?"

"Certainly not. I'm not a hackie."

"I know you're not. I mean—" He stopped. Apparently he had realized that the function of a prowler cop on finding a corpse is not to argue with onlookers. His head jerked around. "Climb out, Bill. DOA. I'll call in." The cop behind the wheel wiggled out, and the one in command wiggled in, and I mounted the stoop and sat down beside my client, noting that she had removed the cap and apparently had stashed it.

I kept my voice low, though it wasn't necessary since the cop was talking on his radio. "In about eight minutes," I said, "experts will begin arriving. They will not be strangers to me. Since as far as I know you merely came to get me to tell you how to win a bet, when they start asking questions I'll be glad to answer them if you want to leave it to me. I've had practise answering questions."

She was gripping my arm again. "You looked in. You saw—"

"Shut up, and I don't beg your pardon. You talk too much. Even if I still lived and worked here we wouldn't go inside because it wouldn't be natural, with cops in a prowler car finding a corpse in a taxi parked at the curb—oh, I haven't mentioned that there's a dead woman in the taxi. I mention it now because naturally I would, and naturally I would stick around to watch developments. I'm talking to keep you from talking, since naturally we would talk. Not only have I had practise answering questions, but I know some of the rules. There are only three methods that are

any good in the long run. You have strong fingers."

"I'm sorry." Her grip relaxed a little, but she held on. "What are the three methods?"

"One: button your lip. Answer nothing whatever. Two: tell the truth straight through. The works. Three: tell a simple basic lie with no trimmings, and stick to it. If you try a fancy lie, or a mixture of truth and lies, or part of the truth but try to save some, you're sunk. Of course I'm just talking to pass the time. In the present situation, as far as I know, there is no reason why you shouldn't just tell the truth."

"You said to leave it to you."

"Yes, but they won't. There are very few people in their jurisdiction they wouldn't rather leave it to than me, on account of certain—here they come. We can stop talking. Naturally we would watch."

An official car I had seen before rolled to a stop behind the prowler car, and Inspector Cramer of Homicide West climbed out.

If you are surprised that an Inspector had come in response to a report that a corpse had been found, I wasn't. The report had of course given the location, in front of 918 West 35th Street, and that address held memories, most of them sour, for the personnel at Homicide West, from Cramer down. A violent death that was in any way connected with Nero Wolfe made them itch, and presumably the report had included the item that Archie Goodwin had stuck his nose in.

My client and I watched the routine activities from our grandstand seat. They were swift, efficient, and thorough. Traffic was detoured at the corner of Ninth Avenue. A section of the street and sidewalk was roped off to enclose the taxi. Floodlights were focused on the taxi and surroundings. A photographer took shots from various angles. Pedestrians from both directions were shunted across the street, where a crowd gathered behind the rope. Some twenty city employees, in uniform and out, were on the scene in less than half an hour after the cop had made the radio call—five of them known to me by name and four others by sight.

A second floodlight had just been turned on when Cramer came around the front of the taxi, crossed to the steps, mounted the first three, and faced me. Since I was sitting, that made our eyes level.

"All right," he said. "Let's go in. I might as well have you and

Wolfe together, and this woman too. That may simplify it. Open the door."

"On the contrary," I said, not moving, "it would complicate it. Mr. Wolfe is in the office reading a book and knows nothing of all the excitement, and cares less. If I went in and told him you wanted to see him, and what about, you know what he would say and so do I. Nothing doing."

"Who came here in that taxi?"

"I don't know. I know nothing whatever about the taxi. When I came out it was there at the curb."

"When did you come out?"

"Twenty minutes past nine."

"Why did you come out?"

"To find a place to spend the night. I have quit my job, so if you're determined to see Mr. Wolfe you'll have to ring the bell."

"You're telling me you've *quit*?"

"Right. I don't work here any more."

"By God. I thought you and Wolfe had tried all the wrinkles there are, but this is a new one. Do you expect me to buy it?"

"It's not a wrinkle. I meant it. I wouldn't sign a pledge never to sleep here again—that depends on Mr. Wolfe's handling of a certain problem; but when I left the house I meant it. The problem has no connection with that taxi or what's in it."

"Did this woman leave the house with you?"

"No. When I opened the door, coming out, she was coming up the stoop. She said she wanted to see Nero Wolfe, and when I told her I no longer worked for him, and anyway he probably wouldn't see her, she said she guessed that for what she wanted I would be better than him. She offered to pay me fifty dollars for consultation on how to win a bet she had made, and we sat here to consult. We had been here fifteen or twenty minutes when the prowler car came along and stopped by the taxi, which had been standing there when I left the house, and naturally I was curious and went to take a look. The cop asked me my name and I told him. When he went to his radio to report I came back to my client, but we didn't do much consulting on account of the commotion. That's the crop."

"Had you ever seen this woman before?"

"No."

"What was the bet she wanted to consult about?"

"That's her affair. She's here. Ask her."

"Did she come in that taxi?"

"Not to my knowledge. Ask her."

"Did you see her get out of the taxi?"

"No. She was halfway up the stoop when I opened the door."

"Did you see anyone get out of the taxi? Or near it?"

"No."

"What's her name?"

"Ask her."

His head moved. "Is your name Judith Bram?"

That was no news for me, since my view through the open door had included the framed picture of the hackie and her name. As well as I had been able to tell in the dim light, the picture was not of my client.

"No," she said.

"What is it?"

"Mira Holt. Mira with an I."

"Did you drive that taxi here?"

"No."

"Did you come here in it?"

"No."

So she had picked Method Three: a simple basic lie.

"Did you have an appointment to see Nero Wolfe?"

"No."

"Where do you live?"

"Seven-fourteen East Eighty-first Street."

"What is your occupation?"

"Modeling. Mostly fashion modeling."

"Are you married?"

"Yes, but I don't live with my husband."

"What's your husband's name?"

She opened her mouth and closed it again. "Waldo Kearns. I use my own name."

"Are you divorced?"

"No."

"Was that taxi here when you arrived?"

"I don't know. I didn't notice, but I suppose it was because it didn't come after we sat down."

"How did you come here?"

"I don't think that matters."

"I'll decide if it matters. How did you come?"

She shook her head. "No. For instance, if somebody drove me

here, or near here, you would ask him, and I might not want you to. No."

So she also knew what "no trimmings" meant.

"I advise you," Cramer advised her, "to tell me how you came."

"I would rather not."

"What was the bet you wanted to consult about?"

"That doesn't matter either. It was a private bet with a friend." Her head turned. "You're a detective, Mr. Goodwin, so you ought to know: do I have to tell him about my private affairs just because I was sitting here with you?"

"Of course not," I assured her. "Not unless he shows some connection between your private affairs and his public affairs, and he hasn't. It's entirely up to you whether—"

"What the devil is all this?" Nero Wolfe bellowed.

I twisted around and so did my client. The door was wide open and he was standing on the threshold, his bulk towering above us. "What's going on?" he demanded.

Since I was merely an ex-employee and Cramer was an Inspector I thought it fitting to let him reply, but he didn't. Apparently he was too flabbergasted at seeing Wolfe actually stick his nose outdoors. Wolfe advanced a step. "Archie. I asked a question."

I had stood up. "Yes, sir, I heard you. Miss Holt, this is Mr. Wolfe. Miss Mira Holt. When I left the house she was coming up the steps. I had never seen her before. When I told her I was no longer in your employ she said I would be better than you and asked to consult me. She has paid me. We sat down to confer. There was an empty taxi parked at the curb, no driver in it. A police car came along and stopped, and a cop found a dead body, female, in the taxi under a piece of canvas. I was there looking in when he removed the canvas.

"I came back up the stoop to sit with my client. We recessed our conference to watch the proceedings. Officers arrived promptly, including Inspector Cramer. When he got around to it he came and questioned us. I knew nothing about the taxi or its contents, and said so. She told him she had not driven the taxi here and hadn't come in it. She gave him her name and address and occupation, but refused to answer questions about her private affairs—for instance, what she was consulting me about. I was telling her that was entirely up to her when you appeared."

Wolfe grunted. "Why didn't you bring Miss Holt inside?"

"Because it's not my house. Or my office."

"Nonsense. There is the front room. If you wish to stand on ceremony I invite you to use it for consultation with your client. Sitting here in this hubbub is absurd. Have you any further information for Mr. Cramer?"

"No."

"Have you, Miss Holt?"

She was on her feet beside me. "I didn't have any," she said. "I haven't got any."

"Then get away from this turmoil. Come in."

Cramer found his tongue. "Just a minute." He had come on up to the stoop and was at my elbow, focused on Wolfe. "This is all very neat. Too damn neat. Goodwin says he quit his job. Did he?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Pfui. That's egregious, Mr. Cramer, and you know it."

"Did it have anything to do with Miss Holt or what she was coming to consult about?"

"No."

"Or with the fact that a taxi was parked at your door with a dead body in it?"

"No."

"Did you know Miss Holt was coming?"

"No. Nor, patently, did Mr. Goodwin."

"Did you know the taxi was out here?"

"No. I am bearing with you, sir. You persist beyond reason. If Mr. Goodwin or I were involved in the circumstance that brought you here, or Miss Holt, would he have sat here with her, awaiting your assault? You know him, and you know me. Come, Archie. Bring your client." He turned.

I told Cramer, "I'll be glad to type up statements and bring them down," touched Mira Holt's arm, and followed her inside, Wolfe having preceded us.

When I had shut the door and the lock had clicked, Wolfe spoke. "Since there's no telephone in the front room and you may have occasion to use one, perhaps the office would be better. I will go to my room."

"Thank you," I said politely: "But it might be still better for us to leave the back way. You may not want us here when I explain the situation. Miss Holt drove that taxi here. A friend of hers named Judith Bram is one of the ninety-three female hackies in New York, and she let Miss Holt take her cab—or maybe Miss

Holt took it without Miss Bram's knowledge. She left—

"No," Mira said. "Judy let me take it."

"Possible," I conceded. "You're a pretty good liar. Let me finish. She left it, empty, in front of a building and went in the building for something, and when she came back there was a dead body in it, a woman, with a knife between its ribs. Either it was covered with a canvas, or she—"

"I covered it," Mira said. "It was under that panel by the driver's seat."

"She's level-headed," I told Wolfe. "Somewhat. She couldn't notify the police, because not only had she and her friend violated the law, but also she had recognized the dead woman. She knew her. She decided to come and consult you and me. I met her on the stoop. She told me a cockeyed tale about a bet she had made with a friend which I'll skip. I said *somewhat* level-headed. I let her see that I knew she was feeding me soap but kept her from blurting it out. So I told Cramer no lies, but she did, and did a good job. But the lies won't keep long. It's barely possible that Judith Bram will deny that she let someone take her cab, but sooner or later—"

"I tried to phone her," Mira said, "but she didn't answer. I was going to tell her to say that someone stole it."

"Quit interrupting me. Did you ever hear of fingerprints? Did you see them working on that cab? So I have a client who is in a double-breasted jam. I'll know more about it after she tells me things. The point is, did she kill that woman? If I thought she did I would bow out quick—I would already have bowed out because it would have been hopeless. But she didn't. One will get you ten that she didn't. If she had—"

That interruption wasn't words; it was her lips against mine and her palms covering my ears. If she had been Wolfe's client I would have shoved her off quick, since that sort of demonstration only ruffles him, but she was mine and there was no point in hurting her feelings. I even patted her shoulder. When she was through I resumed.

"If she had killed her she would not have driven here with the corpse for a passenger to tell you, or even me, a goofy tale about a bet with a friend. Not a chance. She would have dumped the corpse somewhere. Make it twenty to one. Add to that my observation of her while we sat there on the stoop, and it's thirty to one. Therefore I am keeping the fee she paid me, and I'm—by the

way." I reached in my pocket for the bills she had given me, unfolded them, and counted. Three twenties, three tens, and a five. Returning two twenties and a ten to my pocket, I offered her the rest. "Your change. I'm keeping fifty."

She hesitated, then took it. "I'll pay you more. Of course. What are you going to do?"

"I'll know better after you answer some questions. One that shouldn't wait: what did you do with the cap?"

"I have it." She patted her front.

"Good." I returned to Wolfe. "So we'll be going. Thank you again for your offer of hospitality, but Cramer may be ringing the bell any minute. We'll go out the rear, Miss Holt. This way."

"No." Wolfe snapped it. "This is preposterous. Give me half of that fifty dollars."

I raised a brow. "For what?"

"To pay me. You have helped me with many problems; surely I can help you with one. I am not being quixotic. I do not accept your headstrong decision that our long association has ended, but even if it has, your repute is inextricably involved with mine. Your client is in a pickle. I have never tried to do a job without your help; why should you try to do one without mine?"

I wanted to grin at him, but he might have misunderstood. "Okay," I said, and got a twenty from the pocket where I had put the fee, and a five from my wallet, and handed them to him. He took them and headed for the office, and Mira and I followed.

Where to sit was a delicate question—not for Wolfe, who of course went to his oversized custom-built chair behind his desk, or for the client, since Wolfe wiggled a finger to indicate the red leather chair that would put her facing him, but for me. The desk at right angles to Wolfe's was no longer mine. I had a hand on one of the yellow chairs, to move it up, when Wolfe growled, "Confound it, don't be frivolous. We have a job to do."

I went and sat where I had belonged, and asked him, "Do I proceed?"

"Certainly."

I looked at her. In good light, with the cap off, she was very lookable, even in a pickle. "I would like," I said, "to be corroborated. Did you kill that woman?"

"No. No!"

"Okay. Out with it. This time, Method Two: the truth. Judith Bram is a friend of yours?"

"Yes."

"Did she let you take her cab?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I asked her to."

"Why did you ask her to?"

"Because . . . it's a long story."

"Make it as short as you can. We may not have much time."

She was on the edge of the chair, which would have held two of her. "I have known Judy three years. She was a model too, but she didn't like it. She's very unconventional. She had money she had inherited, and she bought a cab and a license about a year ago. She cruises when she feels like it, but she has some regular customers who think it's chic to ride in a cab with a girl driver, and my husband is one of them. He often—"

"Your husband?" Wolfe demanded. "*Miss Holt?*"

"They don't live together," I told him. "Not divorced, but she uses her own name. Fashion model. Go ahead, but keep it short."

She obeyed. "My husband's name is Waldo Kearns. He paints pictures but doesn't sell any. He has money. He often calls Judy to take him somewhere, and he called last night when I was with her and told her to come for him at eight o'clock this evening, and I asked Judy to let me go instead of her. I have been trying to see him for months, to have a talk with him, and he refuses to see me. He doesn't answer my letters. I want a divorce and he doesn't. I think the reason he doesn't is that—"

"Skip it. Get on."

"Well . . . Judy said I could take the cab, and today at seven o'clock I went to her place and she brought it from the garage, and she gave me her cap and jacket, and I drove it to—"

"Where is her place?"

"Bowdoin Street. Number seventeen. In the Village."

"I know. You got in the cab there?"

"Yes. I drove it to Ferrell Street. It's west of Varick and below—"

"I know where it is."

"Then you know it's a dead end. Close to the end is an alley that goes between walls to a little house. That's my husband's. I lived there with him about a year. I got there a little before eight, and turned around and parked in front of the alley. Judy had said she always waited for him there. He didn't come. I didn't want to

go to the house, because as soon as he saw me he would shut the door on me, but when he hadn't come at half-past eight I got out and went—”

“You're sure of the time?”

“Yes. I looked at my watch. Of course.”

“What does it say now?”

She lifted her wrist. “Two minutes after eleven.”

“Right. You went through the alley?”

“Yes, to the house. There's a brass knocker on the door, no bell. I knocked with it, but nobody came. I knocked several times. I could hear the radio or television going inside, I could just barely hear it, so I knocked loud. He couldn't have recognized me through a window because it was too dark and I had the cap pulled down. Of course it could have been Morton, his man as he calls him, playing the radio, but I don't think so because he would have heard the knocker and come to the door.

“I finally gave up and went back to the cab, and as I was getting in I saw her. At first I thought it was a trick he had played, but when I looked closer I saw the knife, and then I recognized her, and she was dead. If I hadn't turned around and gripped the wheel as hard as I could I think I would have fainted. I never have fainted. I sat there—”

“Who was it?”

“It was Phoebe Arden. She was the reason my husband didn't want a divorce. I'm sure she was, or anyway one of the reasons. I think he thought that as long as he was still married to me she couldn't expect him to marry her, and neither could anyone else. But I wasn't thinking about that while I sat there, I was thinking what to do. I knew the right thing was to call the police, but I was driving Judy's cab, and, what was worse, I would have to admit I knew who she was, and they would find out about her and my husband. I don't know how long I sat there.”

“It must have been quite a while. You left the cab to go to the house at eight thirty. How long were you gone?”

“I don't know. I knocked several times, and looked in at the windows, and then knocked some more.” She considered. “At least ten minutes.”

“Then you were back at the cab at eight forty, and from there to here wouldn't take more than ten minutes, and you got here at nine twenty. Did you sit there half an hour?”

“No. I decided to get her—to get it out of the cab. I found that

canvas under the panel. I thought the best place would be somewhere along the riverfront, and I drove there but didn't see a good place, and men tried to stop me twice, and once when I stopped for a light a man opened the door and when I told him I was making a delivery he almost climbed in anyway. Then I thought I would just leave the cab somewhere, anywhere, and I went to a phone booth to call Judy and tell her to say the cab had been stolen, but there was no answer. Then I thought of Nero Wolfe and you, and I drove here. I didn't have much time to make that up about the bet, just on my way here. I knew it wasn't much good while I was telling it."

"So did I." I was frowning at her. "I want you to realize one thing. I believe you when you say you didn't kill her, but it doesn't follow that I swallow you whole. For instance, the divorce situation. If the fact is that your husband wanted one so he could marry Phoebe Arden, and you balked, that would be different."

"No." She was frowning back. "I've told you the truth, every word. I lied to you out there, but if I lied to you now, I'd be a fool."

"You sure would. How good a friend of yours is Judy Bram?"

"She's my best friend. She's a little wild, but I love her."

"Are you sure she rates it?"

"Yes."

"You'd better cross your fingers." I turned to Wolfe. "Since you're helping on this, and I fully appreciate it, our minds should meet. Do you accept it that she didn't kill her?"

"As a working hypothesis, yes."

"Then isn't it likely that she was killed by someone who knew that Miss Holt would be driving the cab?"

"Likely, but far from certain. The embarrassment could have been meant for Miss Bram, not for Miss Holt."

I returned to Mira. "How close are Judy Bram and your husband?"

"Close?" The frown was getting chronic. "They aren't close. If you mean intimate. I doubt if Judy has ever allowed any man to be intimate. My husband may have tried. I suppose he has."

"Could Judy have had any reason to kill Phoebe Arden?"

"Good lord, no."

"Isn't it possible that Judy, unknown to you, had got an idea that she would like to break the ice with your husband, and Phoebe Arden was in the way?"

"I suppose it is, if you want to say that anything is possible, but I don't believe it."

"You heard what I asked Mr. Wolfe and what he answered. I still like it that whoever killed her knew that you were going to drive the cab there. It's certainly possible that Judy Bram told someone."

"Yes, it's possible, but I don't believe it. Judy wouldn't. She just wouldn't."

"It's also possible that you told someone. Did you?"

Her lips twitched. Twice. Two seconds. "No," she said.

"You're lying. I haven't time to be polite. You're lying. Whom did you tell?"

"I'm not going to say. The person I told couldn't possibly have . . . have done anything. Some things are *not* possible."

"Who was it?"

"No, Mr. Goodwin. Really."

I got the twenty and ten from my pocket and twenty from my wallet, got up, and went to her. "Here's your fifty bucks," I said. "Count me out. You can leave the back way."

"But I tell you he couldn't!"

"Then he won't get hurt. I won't bite him. But I've got to know everything you do or it's no good."

Her lips twitched again. "You would really do that? Just give me up?"

"I sure would. I will. With regrets and best wishes."

She breathed. "I phoned a friend last evening and told him. His name is Gilbert Irving."

"Is he more than a friend?"

"No. He is married and so am I. We're friends, that's all."

"Does he know your husband?"

"Yes. They've known each other for years, but they've never been close."

"Did he know Phoebe Arden?"

"He had met her. He didn't *know* her."

"Why did you tell him about your plan to drive the cab?"

"Because I wanted to know what he thought of it. He is very—a very intelligent man."

"What did he think of it?"

"He thought it was foolish. Not foolish exactly, useless. He thought my husband would refuse to listen to me. Honestly, Mr. Goodwin, this *is* foolish. There is absolutely no—"

The doorbell rang. I had taken three steps before I remembered that I no longer worked there; then, not wishing to be frivolous, I continued to the hall and took a look through the one-way glass panel of the front door.

A man and a woman were there on the stoop. A glance was enough to recognize Inspector Cramer, but it took closer inspection for the woman, and I moved down the hall. Even then I wasn't positive, since the light had been dim on the picture of the female hackie in the taxi, but I was sure enough. It was Judith Bram.

It was up to me, since it was my case and Wolfe was merely helping, but he had many times asked for my opinion and it wouldn't hurt to reciprocate; so I stepped to the office door and said, "Cramer and Judy Bram. Shall I—"

"Judy!" Mira cried. "She's here?"

I ignored her. "Shall I scoot with Miss Holt and leave them to you?"

He closed his eyes. In three seconds he opened them. "I would say no. But the decision is yours."

"Then we stick. I want to meet Judy anyhow. Sit tight, Miss Holt. Never drop a simple basic lie until it drops you."

As I turned, the bell rang again. I went to the front, put the chain bolt on, opened the door the two inches the chain allowed, and spoke through the crack. "Do you want me, Inspector?"

"I want in. Open up."

"Glad to for you, but not for strangers. Who is the lady?"

"Her name is Judith Bram. She's the owner and driver—"

"I want to see Mira Holt!" the lady said, meaning it. "Open the door!"

I removed the chain, but didn't have to swing the door because she saved me the trouble. She came with it and darted down the hall. Seeing that Cramer, after her, would brush me, I stiffened to make the brush a bump, and he wobbled and lost a step, giving me time to shut the door and reach the office at his heels. When we entered, Judy was sitting on the arm of the red leather chair with her arm across Mira's shoulders, jabbering. Cramer grabbed her arm and barked at her, but she ignored him.

"—and I said yes, the cab might have still been there in front when you left, but I was sure you wouldn't take it, and anyway—"

Cramer yanked her up and around, and as she came she swung with her free hand and smacked him in the face. There was too

much of him to be staggered by it, but the sound effect was fine. She jerked loose and glared at him. Her big, brown, well-spaced eyes were ideal for glaring. I had a feeling that I had seen her before, but I hadn't. It was just an old memory: a seventh-grade classmate out in Ohio whom I had been impelled to kiss, and she had socked me on the ear with her arithmetic book. She is now married, with five children.

"That's not advisable, Miss Bram," Cramer stated. "Striking a police officer." He moved, got a yellow chair, and swung it around. "Here. Sit down."

"I'll sit where I please." She perched again on the red leather arm. "Is it advisable for a police officer to manhandle a citizen? When I got a hack license I informed myself about laws. Am I under arrest?"

"No."

"Then don't touch me." Her head swung around. "You're Nero Wolfe? You're even bigger." She didn't say bigger than what. "I'm Judy Bram. Are you representing my friend Mira Holt?"

His eyes on her were half closed. "Representing" is not the word Miss Bram. I'm a detective, not a lawyer. Miss Holt has hired Mr. Goodwin, and he has hired me as his assistant. You call her your friend. Are you her friend?"

"Yes. And I want to know. She left my place around half-past seven, and about an hour later I went out to keep a date. I had left my cab out front and it wasn't there, but I supposed—"

"Hold it," Cramer snapped. He was on the yellow chair, and I was at my desk. "I'll do the talking—"

She merely raised her voice. "—I supposed a man from the garage had come and got it, I have that arrangement—"

"Shut up!" Cramer roared. "Or I'll shut you up!"

"How?" she asked.

It was a question. He had several choices: clamp his paw on her mouth, or pick her up and carry her out, or call in a couple of big strong men from out front, or hit her with a blunt instrument, or shoot her. All had drawbacks.

"Permit me," Wolfe said. "I suggest, Mr. Cramer, that you have bungled it. The notion of suddenly confronting Miss Holt with Miss Bram was of course tempting, but your appraisal of Miss Bram's temperament was faulty. Now you're stuck. You won't get the contradictions you're after. Miss Holt would be a simpleton to supply particulars until she knows what Miss Bram has said. As

you well know, that does not necessarily imply culpability for either of them."

Cramer rasped, "You're telling Miss Holt not to answer any questions."

"Am I? If so, unwittingly. Now, of course, you have made it plain. It would appear that you have only two alternatives: either let Miss Bram finish her account, or remove her."

"There's a third one I like better. I'll remove Miss Holt." Cramer got up. "Come on, Miss Holt. I'm taking you down for questioning in connection with the murder of Phoebe Arden."

"Is she under arrest?" Judy demanded.

"No. But if she doesn't talk she will be. As a material witness."

"Can he do that, Mr. Wolfe?"

"Yes."

"Without a warrant?"

"In the circumstances, yes."

"Come on, Miss Holt," Cramer growled.

I was sitting with my jaw set. Wolfe would rather miss a meal than let Cramer or any other cop take a client of his from that office into custody, and over the years I had seen and heard him pull some fancy maneuvers to prevent it. But this was my client, and he wasn't batting an eye. I admit that it would have had to be something extra fancy, and it was up to me, not him, but I had split the fee with him.

So I sat with my jaw set while Mira left the chair and Judy jabbered and Cramer touched Mira's arm and they headed for the door. Then I came to, scribbled on my memo pad—formerly my memo pad—tore the sheet off, and made for the hall. Cramer had his hand on the knob.

"Here's the phone number," I told her. "Twenty-four-hour service. Don't forget Method Three."

She took the slip, said, "I won't," and crossed the sill, with Cramer right behind. I noted that the floodlights and the taxi were still there before I shut the door.

Back in the office Wolfe had his eyes closed and Judy Bram was scowling at him. She switched the scowl to me and demanded, "Why don't you put him to bed?"

"Too heavy. How many people did you tell that Mira was going to drive your cab to her husband's house?"

She eyed me, straight, for two breaths, then went to the red leather chair and sat. I took the yellow one, to be closer.

"I thought you were working for her," she said.

"I am."

"You don't sound like it. She didn't drive my cab."

I shook my head. "Come on. Would I be working for her if she hadn't opened up? You told her yesterday that Kearns had phoned you to call for him at eight o'clock today, and she asked you to let her go instead of you. She wanted to have a talk with him about a divorce. How many people did you tell about it?"

"Nobody. If she opened up what's the rest of it?"

"Ask her when you see her. Did you kill Phoebe Arden?"

From the flash in her eye she would have smacked me if I had been close enough. "Oh, for God's sake," she said. "Get a club. Drag me by the hair."

"Later maybe." I leaned to her. "Look, Miss Bram. Give your temperament a rest and use your brain. I am working for Mira Holt. I know exactly where she was and what she did, every minute, from seven o'clock this evening on, but I'm not going to tell you. Of course you know that the dead body of a woman named Phoebe Arden was found in your cab. I am certain that Mira didn't kill her, but she is probably going to be charged. I am not certain that the murderer tried to get her tagged for it, but it looks like it. I would be a fathead to tell the murderer about her movement. Wouldn't I? Answer with your brain."

"Yes." She was meeting my eyes.

"Okay. Give me one good reason why I should cross you off. One you would accept if you were in my place. Mira has, naturally, but why should I?"

"Because there's not the slightest—" She stopped. "No. You don't know that. All right. But don't try twisting my arm. I know some tricks."

"I'll keep my distance if you will. Did you kill Phoebe Arden?"

"No."

"Do you know who did?"

"No."

"Have you any suspicions? Any ideas?"

"Yes. Or I would have if I knew anything—where and when it happened. Did Phoebe come out to the cab with Waldo Kearns?"

"No. Kearns didn't show up. Mira never saw him."

"But Phoebe came?"

"Not alive. When Mira saw her she was dead. In the cab."

"Then my idea is Waldo. The sophisticated ape. You know

you're not any too bright. If I killed her in my own cab while Mira was driving it, I already know everything you do and more. Why not tell me?"

I looked at Wolfe, who had opened his eyes off and on. He grunted. "You told her to use her brain," he muttered.

I returned to Judy. "You certainly would know this: Mira got there before eight o'clock and parked in front. When Kearns hadn't showed at eight thirty she went to the house and spent ten minutes knocking and looking in windows. When she returned to the cab the dead body was in it. She never saw Kearns."

"But my God." Her brows were up. She turned her hands over. "All she had to do was dump it!"

"She hasn't got your temperament. She—"

"She drove *here* with it? To consult *you*?"

"She might have done worse. In fact, she tried to. She phoned *you*, and got no answer. What's your idea about Kearns?"

"He killed Phoebe."

"Why?"

"I don't know. He tried to shake her and she hung on. Or she cheated on him. Or she had a bad cold and he was afraid he would catch it. He put the body in the cab to frame Mira. He hates her because she told him the truth about himself once."

"Did you know Phoebe well? Who and what was she?"

"Well enough. She was a widow at thirty, roaming around. I might have killed her, at that. About a year ago she started scattering remarks about me, and I broke her neck. Almost."

"Did it cure her? I mean of remark-scattering?"

"Yes."

"We might as well finish with you. You told Mr. Wolfe that Mira left your place around half-past seven and about an hour later you went out to keep a date. So you might have left at a quarter after eight."

"I might, but I didn't. I walked to Mitchell Hall on Fourteenth Street to make a speech at a cab drivers' meeting, and I got there at five minutes to nine. After the meeting I walked back home, and two cops were there waiting for me. They were dumb enough to ask me first where my cab was, and I said I supposed it was in the garage. When they said no, it was parked on Thirty-fifth Street, and asked me to come and identify it, naturally I went. I also identified a dead body, which they hadn't mentioned. Is that Inspector Cramer dumb?"

"No."

"I thought not. When he asked me if I knew Mira Holt, of course I said yes, and when he asked when I last saw her I told him. Since I had no idea what had happened I thought that was safest, but I said I hadn't told her she could take the cab and I knew she wouldn't take it without asking me. Does that finish with me?"

"It's a good start. How well do you know Gilbert Irving?"

That fazed her. Her mouth opened and she gawked with her big, brown, well-spaced eyes. "Are my ears working?" she demanded. "Did you say Gilbert Irving?"

"That's right."

"Who let him in?"

"Mira mentioned him. How well do you know him?"

"Too well. I dream about a lion standing on a rock about to spring at me, and I suspect it's him. If my subconscious is yearning for him it had better go soak its head, because first he's married and his wife has claws, and second, when he looks at Mira or hears her voice he has to lean against something to keep from trembling. Did she tell you that?"

"No. Who is he? What does he do?"

"Something in Wall Street, but he doesn't look it. Why did Mira mention him?"

"Because I made her. She phoned him last evening and told him she was going to drive your cab and why. She wanted to know what he thought of it. I want to know what motive he might have for killing Phoebe Arden."

She opened her mouth to reply, then decided to laugh instead. I raised a brow. "Your subconscious taking over?"

"No." She sobered. "I couldn't help it. It struck me, of course Gil killed her. He couldn't bear the thought of Mira's husband being unfaithful to her, it was an insult to her womanhood, so he killed Phoebe. Do you blame me for laughing?"

"No. I'll laugh too when I get around to it. Does anything else strike you? A motive for him you wouldn't laugh at?"

"Of course not. It's ridiculous. You're just floundering around. Have you finished with me?"

I looked at Wolfe. His eyes were closed. "For now, yes," I told her, "unless Mr. Wolfe thinks I skipped something."

"How can he? You can talk in your sleep, but you can't think." She stood up. "What are you going to do?"

"Find a murderer and stick pins in him. Or her."

"Not sitting here you aren't. Don't bother, I know the way out. Why don't you go and tackle Wally Kearns? I'll go with you."

"Thanks, I'll manage."

"Where did he take Mira?"

"Either to Homicide West, two thirty West Twentieth, or to the District Attorney's office, one fifty-five Leonard. Try Twentieth Street first."

"I will." She turned and was off. I followed, to let her out, but she was a fast walker and I would have had to trot to catch up. When I reached the door she had it open. I stepped out to the stoop and watched her descend to the sidewalk and turn west. The floodlights and ropes and police cars were gone, and so was Judy's cab. My wrist watch said five minutes past midnight as I went in and shut the door. I returned to the office and found Wolfe on his feet with his eyes open.

"I assumed," I said, "that if you wanted something from her I hadn't got, you would say so."

"Naturally."

"Have you any comments?"

"No. It's bedtime."

"Yeah. Since you're with me on this, which I appreciate, perhaps I'd better sleep here. If you don't mind."

"Certainly. You own your bed. I have a suggestion. I presume you intend to have a look at that place in the morning, and to see Mr. Kearns. It might be well for me to see him too."

"I agree. Thank you for suggesting it. If they haven't got him downtown I'll have him here at eleven o'clock." I made it eleven because that was his earliest hour for an appointment, when he came down from his two-hour session up in the plant rooms with the orchids.

"Make it a quarter past eleven," he said. "I will be engaged until then with Mr. Anderson."

I opened my mouth and closed it again. "Didn't you phone him not to come?"

"On the contrary, I phoned him to come. On reflection I saw that I had been hasty. In my employ, as my agent, you had made a commitment, and I was bound by it. I should not have repudiated it. I should have honored it, and then dismissed you if I considered your disregard of the rules intolerable."

"I see. I can understand you'd rather fire me than have me quit."

"I said 'if.' "

I lifted my shoulders and dropped them. "It's a little complicated. If I have quit you can't fire me. If I haven't quit I am still on your payroll, and it would be unethical for me to have Miss Holt as my client. It would also be wrong for you to accept pay from me for helping me with the kind of work you are paying me to do. If you return the twenty-five to me and I return the fifty to Miss Holt, I will be deserting an innocent fellow being in a jam whom I have accepted as a client, and that would be inexcusable. It looks to me as if we have got ourselves in a fix that is absolutely hopeless, and I can't see—"

"Confound it," he roared, "go to bed!" and marched out.

By 8:15 Tuesday morning I was pretty well convinced that Mira Holt was in the coop, since I had got it from three different sources. At 7:20 Judy Bram had phoned to say that Mira was under arrest and what was I going to do. I said it wouldn't be practical to tell a suspect my plans, and she hung up on me. At 7:40 Lon Cohen of the *Gazette* phoned to ask if it was true that I had quit my job with Nero Wolfe, and if so what was I doing there, and was Mira Holt my client, and if so what was she doing in the can, and had she killed Phoebe Arden or not. Since Lon had often been useful and might be again, I explained fully, off the record, why I couldn't explain. And at eight o'clock the radio said that Mira Holt was being held as a material witness in the murder of Phoebe Arden.

Neither Lon nor the radio supplied any items that helped, nor did the morning papers. The *Star* had a picture of the taxi parked in front of Wolfe's house, but I had seen that for myself. It also had a description of the clothes Phoebe Arden had died in, but what I needed was a description of the clothes the murderer had killed in. And it gave the specifications of the knife—an ordinary kitchen knife with a five-inch blade and a plastic handle—but if the answer was going to come from any routine operation like tracing the knife or lifting prints from the handle, it would be Cramer's army who would get it, not me.

I made one phone call, to Anderson, to ask him to postpone his appointment because Wolfe was busy on a case, and he said sure, it wasn't urgent; and, since Fritz takes Wolfe's breakfast to his room and I seldom see him before he comes down to the office at eleven, I put a note on his desk. I wanted to make another call, to

Nathaniel Parker, the lawyer, but vetoed it. For getting Mira out on bail he would have charged about ten times what she had paid me, and there was no big hurry. It would teach her not to drive a hack without a license.

At a quarter past eight I left the house and went to Ninth Avenue for a taxi, and at half-past I dismissed it at the corner of Carmine and Ferrell, and walked down Ferrell Street to its dead end. There were only two alternatives for what had happened during the period—call it ten minutes—when Mira had been away from the cab: either the murderer, having already killed Phoebe Arden, had carried or dragged the body to the cab and hoisted it in, or he had got in the cab with her and killed her there. I preferred the latter, since you can walk to a cab with a live woman in much less time than you can carry her to it dead, and also since, even in a secluded spot like that and even after dark, there is much less risk of being noticed. But in either case they had to come from some place nearby.

The first place to consider was Kearns's house, but it only took five minutes to cross it off. The alley that led to it was walled on both sides, Mira had been parked at its mouth, and there was no other way to get from the house to the street. On the left of the alley was a walled-in lumber yard, and on the right was a dingy old two-story warehouse. On inspection neither of them seemed an ideal spot for cover, but across the street was a beaut. It was an open lot cluttered with blocks of stone scattered and piled around, some rough and some chiseled and polished. A whole company could have hid there, let alone one murderer and one victim.

As you know, I was already on record that Mira hadn't killed her, but it was nice to see that stoneyard. If there had been no place to hide in easy distance. . . Three men were there, two discussing a stone and one chiseling, but they wouldn't be there at eight in the evening. I recrossed the street, entered the alley, and walked through.

By gum, Kearns had a garden, a sizable patch, say forty by sixty, with flowers in bloom and a little pool with a fountain, and a flagstone path leading to the door of a two-story brick house painted white. I hadn't known there was anything like it in Manhattan, and I thought I knew Manhattan. A man in a gray shirt and blue jeans was kneeling among the flowers, and halfway up the path I stopped and asked him, "Are you Waldo Kearns?"

"Do I look it?" he demanded.

"Yes and no. Are you Morton?"

"That's my name. What's yours?"

"Goodwin." I headed for the house, but he called, "Nobody there," and I turned.

"Where's Mr. Kearns?"

"I don't know. He went out a while ago."

"When will he be back?"

"I couldn't say."

I looked disappointed. "I should have phoned. I want to buy a picture. I came last evening around half-past eight and knocked, but nothing doing. I knocked loud because I heard the radio or TV going."

"It was the TV. I was watching it. I heard you knock. I don't open the door at night when he's not here. There's some tough ones around this neighborhood."

"I don't blame you. I suppose I just missed him. What time did he leave last evening?"

"What difference does it make when he left if he wasn't here?"

Perfectly logical, not only for him but for me. If Kearns hadn't been there when Mira arrived in the cab it didn't matter when he had left. I would have liked to ask Morton one more question; whether anyone had left with him, but from the look in his eye he would have used some more logic on me; so I skipped it, said I'd try again, and went.

There was no use hanging around because if Kearns had gone to call at the District Attorney's office by request, which was highly probable, there was no telling when he would be back. I had got Gilbert Irving's business address from the phone book, on Wall Street, but there was no use going there at that early hour. However, I had also got his home address, on East 78th Street, and I might catch him before he left, so I hoofed it along Ferrell Street back to civilization and flagged a taxi.

It was 9:15 when I climbed out in front of the number on 78th Street, a tenement palace with a marquee and a doorman. In the lobby another uniformed sentry sprang into action, and I told him, "Mr. Gilbert Irving. Tell him a friend of Miss Holt." He went and used a phone, returned and said, "Fourteen B," and watched me like a hawk as I walked to the elevator and entered. When I got out at the fourteenth floor the elevator man stood and watched until I had pushed the button and the door had opened and I had been invited in.

The inviter was no maid or butler. She might have passed for a maid in uniform, but not in the long, flowing, patterned-silk number which she probably called a breakfast gown. Without any suggestions about my hat she said, "This way, please," and led me across the hall, through an arch into a room half as big as Kearns's garden, and over to chairs near a corner. She sat on one of them and indicated another for me.

I stood. "Perhaps the man downstairs didn't understand me," I suggested. "I asked for Mr. Irving."

"I know," she said. "He isn't here. I am his wife. We are friends of Miss Holt, and we're disturbed about the terrible—about her difficulty. You're a friend of hers?"

Her voice was a surprise because it didn't fit. She was slender and not very tall, with a round little face and a little curved mouth, but her deep strong voice was what you would expect from a female sergeant. Nothing about her suggested the claws that Judy Bram had mentioned, but they could have been drawn in.

"A new friend," I said. "I've known her twelve hours. If you've read the morning paper you may have noted that she was sitting on the stoop of Nero Wolfe's house with a man named Archie Goodwin when a cop found the body in the taxi. I'm Goodwin, and she has hired me to find out things."

She adjusted the gown to cover a leg better. "According to the radio she has hired Nero Wolfe. She was arrested in his house."

"That's a technical point. We're both working on it. I'm seeing people who might have some information, and Mr. Irving is on my list. Is he at his office?"

"I suppose so. He left earlier than usual." The leg was safe, no exposure above the ankle, but she adjusted the gown again. "What kind of information? Perhaps I could help?"

I couldn't very well ask if her husband had told her that Mira had told him she was going to drive Judy's cab. But she wanted to help. I sat down. "Almost anything might be useful, Mrs. Irving. Were you and your husband also friends of Phoebe Arden?"

"I was. My husband knew her, of course, but you couldn't say they were friends."

"Were they enemies?"

"Oh, no. It was just that they didn't hit it off."

"When did you see her last?"

"Four days ago, last Friday, at a cocktail party at Waldo Kearns's house. I was thinking about it when you came."

"You hadn't seen her since?"

"No." She was going to add something, but checked it.

It was so obvious that I asked, "But you had heard from her? A letter or a phone call?"

"How did you know that?" she demanded.

"I didn't. Most detective work is guessing. Was it a letter?"

"No." She hesitated. "I would like to help, Mr. Goodwin, but I doubt if it's important, and I certainly don't want any notoriety."

"Of course not, Mrs. Irving." I was sympathetic. "If you mean, if you tell me something will I tell the police, absolutely not. They have arrested my client."

"Well." She crossed her legs, glancing down to see that nothing was revealed. "I phoned Phoebe yesterday afternoon. My husband and I had tickets for the theater last evening, but about three o'clock he phoned me that a business associate from the West Coast had arrived unexpectedly, and he had to take him to dinner. So I phoned Phoebe and we arranged to meet at Morsini's at a quarter to seven for dinner and then go to the theater. I was there on time, but she didn't come.

"At a quarter past seven I called her number, but there was no answer. I don't like to eat alone at a place like Morsini's, so I waited a little longer and then left word for her and went to Schrafft's. She didn't come. I thought she might come to the theater, the Majestic, and I waited in the lobby until after nine, then I left a ticket for her at the box office and went in. I would tell the police about it if I thought it was important, but it doesn't really tell anything except that she was at home when I phoned around three o'clock. Does it?"

"Sure it does. Did she agree definitely to meet you at Morsini's or was it tentative?"

"It was quite definite."

"Then it was certainly something that happened after three o'clock that kept her from meeting you. It was probably something that happened after six thirty or she would have phoned you—if she was still alive. Have you any idea at all what it might have been?"

"None whatever. I can't guess."

"Have you any ideas about who might have killed her?"

"No. I can't guess that either."

"Do you think Mira Holt killed her?"

"Good heavens, no. Not Mira. Even if she had—"

"Even if she had what?"

"Nothing. Mira wouldn't kill anybody. They don't think that, do they?"

Over the years at least a thousand people have asked me what the police think, and I appreciate the compliment though I rarely deserve it. Life would be much simpler if I always knew what the police think at any given moment. It's hard enough to know what I think. After another ten minutes with her I decided that I thought that Mrs. Irving had nothing more to contribute, so I thanked her and departed. She came with me to the hall, and even picked up my hat from the chair where I had dropped it. I had yet to get a glimpse of her legs.

It was ten minutes to ten when I emerged to the sidewalk and turned left for Lexington Avenue and the subway, and a quarter past when I entered the marble lobby of a towering beehive on Wall Street and consulted the building directory. Gilbert Irving's firm had the whole thirtieth floor, and I found the proper bank of elevators, entered one, and was hoisted straight up three hundred feet for nothing. In a paneled chamber with a thick conservative carpet a handsome conservative creature at a desk bigger than Wolfe's told me in a voice like silk that Mr. Irving was not in and that she knew not when he would arrive or where he was. If I cared to wait?

I didn't. I left, got myself dropped back down the three hundred feet, and went to another subway, this time the west side; and, leaving at Christopher, walked to Ferrell Street and on to its dead end and through the alley. Morton, still at work in the garden, greeted me with reserve but not coldly, said Kearns had not returned and there had been no word from him, and, as I was turning to go, suddenly stood up and asked, "Did you say you wanted to buy a picture?"

I said that was my idea but naturally I wanted to see it first, left him wagging his head, walked the length of Ferrell Street the fourth time that day, found a taxi, and gave the driver the address which might or might not still be mine. As we turned into 35th Street from Eighth Avenue, at five minutes past eleven, there was another taxi just ahead of us, and it stopped at the curb in front of the brownstone.

I handed my driver a bill, hopped out, and had mounted the stoop by the time the man from the other cab had crossed the sidewalk. I had never seen him or a picture of him, or heard him

described, but I knew him. I don't know whether it was his floppy black hat or shoestring tie, neat little ears or face like a squirrel, but I knew him. I had the door open when he reached the stoop.

"I would like to see Mr. Nero Wolfe," he said. "I'm Waldo Kearns."

Since Wolfe had suggested that I should bring Kearns there so we could look at him together, I would just as soon have let him think I had filled the order, but of course that wouldn't do. So when, having taken the floppy black hat and put it on the shelf in the hall, I escorted him to the office and pronounced his name, I added, "I met Mr. Kearns out front. He arrived just as I did."

Wolfe, behind his desk, had been pouring beer when we entered. He put the bottle down. "Then you haven't talked with him?"

"No, sir."

He turned to Kearns, in the red leather chair. "Will you have beer, sir?"

"Heavens, no." Kearns was emphatic. "I didn't come for amenities. My business is urgent. I am extremely displeased with the counsel you have given my wife. You must have hypnotized her. She refuses to see me. She refuses to accept the services of my lawyer, even to arrange bail for her. I demand an explanation. I intend to hold you to account for alienating the affection of my wife."

"Affections," Wolfe said.

"What?"

"Affections. In that context the plural is used." He lifted the glass and drank, and licked his lips.

Kearns stared at him. "I didn't come here," he said, "to have my grammar corrected."

"Not grammar. Diction."

Kearns pounded the chair arm. "What have you to say?"

"It would be futile for me to say anything whatever until you have regained your senses, if you have any. If you think your wife had affection for you until she met me twelve hours ago, you're an ass. If you know she hadn't, your threat is fatuous. In either case what can you expect but contempt?"

"I expect an explanation! I expect the truth! I expect you to tell me why my wife refuses to see me!"

"I can't tell you what I don't know. I don't even know that she has, since in your present state I question the accuracy of your

reporting. When and where did she refuse?"

"This morning. Just now, in the District Attorney's office. She won't even talk to my lawyer. She told him she was waiting to hear from you and Goodwin." His head jerked to me. "You're Goodwin?"

I admitted it. His head jerked back. "It's humiliating! It's degrading! My wife under arrest! Mrs. Waldo Kearns in jail! Dishonor to my name and to me! And you're to blame!"

Wolfe took a breath. "I doubt if it's worth the trouble," he said, "but I'm willing to try. I presume what you're after is an account of our conversation with your wife last evening. I might consider supplying it, but first I would have to be satisfied of your *bona fides*. Will you answer some questions?"

"It depends on what they are."

"Probably you have already answered them, to the police. Has your wife wanted a divorce and have you refused to consent?"

"Yes. I regard the marriage contract as a sacred covenant."

"Have you refused to discuss it with her in recent months?"

"The police didn't ask that."

"I ask it. I need to establish not only your *bona fides*, Mr. Kearns, but also your wife's. It shouldn't embarrass you to answer that."

"It doesn't embarrass me. You can't embarrass me. It would have been useless to discuss it with her since I wouldn't consider it."

"So you wouldn't see her?"

"Naturally. That was all she would talk about."

"Have you been contributing to her support since she left you?"

"She didn't leave me. We agreed to try living separately. She wouldn't let me contribute to her support. I offered to. I wanted to."

"The police certainly asked you if you killed Phoebe Arden. Did you?"

"No. Why in God's name would I kill her?"

"I don't know. Miss Judith Bram suggested that she may have had a bad cold and you were afraid you would catch it, but that seems far-fetched. By the way—"

"Judy? Judy Bram said that? I don't believe it!"

"But she did. In this room last evening, in the chair you now occupy. She also called you a sophisticated ape."

"You're lying!"

"No. I'm not above lying, or below it, but the truth will do now. Also—"

"You're lying. You've never seen Judy Bram. You're merely repeating something my wife said."

"That's interesting, Mr. Kearns, and even suggestive. You are willing to believe that your wife called you a sophisticated ape, but not that Miss Bram did. When I do lie I try not to be clumsy. Miss Bram was here last evening, with Mr. Goodwin and me, for half an hour or more; and that brings me to a ticklish point. I must ask you about a detail that the police don't know about. Certainly they asked about your movements last evening, but they didn't know that you had arranged with Judith Bram to call for you in her cab at eight o'clock. Unless you told them?"

Kearns sat still, and for him it is worth mentioning. With many people sitting still is nothing remarkable, but with him it was. His sitting, like his face, reminded me of a squirrel; he kept moving or twitching something—a hand, a shoulder, a foot, even his head. Now he was motionless all over.

"Say that again," he commanded.

Wolfe obeyed. "Have you told the police that you had arranged with Miss Bram to call for you in her cab at eight o'clock last evening?"

"No. Why should I tell them something that isn't true?"

"You shouldn't, ideally, but people often do. I do occasionally. However, that's irrelevant. Evidently Miss Bram hasn't told the police, but she told me. I mention it to insure that you'll tell *me* the truth when you recount your movements last evening."

"If she told you that she lied."

"Oh, come, Mr. Kearns." Wolfe was disgusted. "It is established that her cab stood at the mouth of the alley leading to your house for more than half an hour, having come at your bidding. If you omitted that detail in your statement to the police I may have to supply it. Haven't you spoken with Miss Bram since?"

"No." He was still motionless. "Her phone doesn't answer. She's not at home. I went there." He passed his tongue across his lower lip. I admit I have never seen a squirrel do that. "I couldn't tell the police her cab was there last evening because I didn't know it was. I wasn't there."

"Where were you? Consider that I know you had ordered the cab for eight o'clock and hadn't canceled the order."

"I've told the police where I was."

"Then your memory has been jogged."

"It didn't need jogging. I was at the studio of a man named Prosch. I went there to meet Miss Arden and look at a picture she was going to buy. I got there at a quarter to eight and left at nine o'clock. She hadn't come, and—"

"If you please. Miss Phoebe Arden?"

"Yes. She phoned me at half-past seven and said she had about decided to buy a painting, a still life, from Prosch, and was going to his studio to look at it again, and asked me to meet her there to help her decide. I was a little surprised because she knows what I think of daubers like Prosch, but I said I would go. His studio is on Carmine Street, in walking distance from my house, and I walked. She hadn't arrived, and I had only been there two or three minutes when she phoned and asked to speak to me. She said she had been delayed and would get there as soon as she could, and asked me to wait for her. My thought was that I would wait until midnight rather than have her buy a still life by Prosch, but I didn't say so. I didn't wait until midnight, but I waited until nine o'clock: I discussed painting with Prosch a while, until he became insufferable, and then went down to the street and waited there. She never came. I walked back home."

Wolfe grunted. "Can there be any doubt that it was Miss Arden on the phone? Both times?"

"Not the slightest. I couldn't possibly mistake her voice."

"What time was it when you left Mr. Prosch and went down to the street?"

"About half-past eight. I told the police I couldn't be exact about that, but I could about when I started home. It was exactly nine o'clock." Kearns's hands moved. Back to normal. "Now I'll hear what you have to say."

"In a moment. Miss Bram was to come at eight o'clock. Why didn't you phone her?"

"Because I thought I would be back. Probably a little late, but she would wait. I didn't phone her after Miss Arden phoned that she was delayed because she would be gone."

"Where was she to drive you?"

"To Long Island. A party. What does that matter?" He was himself again. "You talk now, and I want the truth!"

Wolfe picked up his glass, emptied it, and put it down. "Possibly you are entitled to it, Mr. Kearns. Unquestionably a man of your standing would feel keenly the ignominy of having a wife in

jail—the woman to whom you have given your name, though she doesn't use it. You may know that she came to this house at twenty minutes past nine last evening."

"I know nothing. I told you she won't see me."

"So you did. She arrived just as Mr. Goodwin was leaving the house on an errand and they met on the stoop. No doubt you know that Mr. Goodwin is permanently in my employ as my confidential assistant—permanently, that is, in the sense that neither of us has any present intention of ending it or changing its terms."

Kearns was fidgeting again. I was not. He spoke. "The paper said he had left your employ. It didn't say on account of my wife, but of course it was."

"Bosh." Wolfe's head turned. "Do you agree? Archie?"

"Bosh," I agreed. "The idea of quitting on account of Miss Holt never entered my head."

Kearns hit the chair arm. "Mrs. Kearns!"

"Okay," I conceded. "Mrs. Waldo Kearns."

"So," Wolfe said, "your wife's first contact was with Mr. Goodwin. They sat on the stoop and talked. You know, of course, that Miss Bram's cab was there at the curb with Miss Arden's body in it."

"Yes. What did my wife say?"

"I'll come to that. Police came along in a car and discovered the body, reported it, and soon there was an army. A policeman named Cramer talked with Mr. Goodwin and your wife, I went to the door and invited them to enter—not Mr. Cramer—and they did so. We talked for half an hour or so, when Mr. Cramer came with Miss Bram, and they were admitted. Mr. Cramer, annoyed by the loquacity of Miss Bram, and wishing to speak with your wife privately, took her away. You demanded the truth, sir, and you have it. I add one item, also true: since your wife had engaged Mr. Goodwin's services, and through him mine also, what she told us was confidential and can't be divulged. Now for—"

Kearns bounced out of the chair, and as he did so the doorbell rang. Since a man who might have stuck a knife in a woman might be capable of other forms of violence, I was going to leave the door to Fritz, but Wolfe shot me a glance and I went to the hall for a look. On the stoop was a tall guy with a bony face and a strong jaw. Behind me Kearns was yapping but had drawn no weapon. I went to the front and opened the door.

"To see Mr. Wolfe," he said. "My name is Gilbert Irving."

The temptation was too strong. Only twelve hours ago I had seen a confrontation backfire for Cramer, when he had brought Judy Bram in to face Mira; but this time the temperament was already in the office, having a fit, and it would be interesting to see the reaction, and possibly helpful. So I told him to come in, took his Homburg and put it on the shelf beside the floppy black number, and steered him to the office.

Kearns was still on his feet yapping, but when Wolfe's eyes left him to direct a scowl at me he turned his head. I ignored the scowl. I had disregarded another rule by bringing in a visitor without consulting Wolfe, but as far as I was concerned Mira was still my client and it was my case. I merely pronounced names. "Mr. Gilbert Irving. Mr. Wolfe."

The reaction was interesting enough, though not helpful, since it was no news that Kearns and Irving were not pals. Perhaps Kearns didn't actually spit at him, because it could have been merely that moisture came out with his snort. Two insulting words followed immediately.

Irving must have had lessons or practise, or both. His uppercut, with his right, was swift and sure, and it had plenty of power. It caught Kearns right on the button and sent him straight up a good six inches before he swayed against the corner of Wolfe's desk.

To do him justice, Kearns handled it as well as could be expected, even better. He surprised me. He didn't utter a peep. The desk saved him from going down. He stayed propped against it for three seconds, straightened with his hand on it for support, moved his head backward and forward twice, decided his neck was still together, and moved.

His first few steps were wobbly, but by the time he reached the door to the hall they were steadier, and he made the turn okay. I went to the hall and stood, as he got his hat from the shelf and let himself out, pulling the door shut without banging it, and re-entered the office as Irving was saying, "I should beg your pardon. I do. I'm sorry."

"You were provoked," Wolfe told him. He gestured at the red leather chair. "Be seated."

"Hold it." I was there. "I guess I should beg your pardon, Mr. Irving, for not telling you he was here, and now I just beg it again. I have to tell Mr. Wolfe something that can't wait. It won't

take long." I went and opened the door to the front room. "If you'll step in here."

He didn't like the idea. "My business is pressing," he said.

"So is mine. If you please?"

"Your name is Archie Goodwin?"

"Yes."

He hesitated a second, and then came, and crossed the sill, and I closed the door. Since it and the wall were soundproofed, I didn't have to lower my voice to tell Wolfe, "I want to report. I saw his wife."

"Indeed. Will a summary do?"

"No." I sat. "It will for one detail, that eighty feet from where the cab was parked there is a stoneyard that would be perfect cover, you couldn't ask for better, but you must have my talk with Mrs. Irving verbatim."

"Go ahead."

I did so, starting with a description of her. It had been years since he had first told me that when I described a man he must see him and hear him, and I had learned the trick long ago. I also knew how to report conversations word for word—much longer ones than the little chat I had had with Mrs. Irving.

When I had finished he asked one question. "Was she lying?"

"I wouldn't bet either way. If so, she is good. If it was a mixture, I'd hate to have to sort it out."

"Very well." He closed his eyes. "Bring him."

I went and opened the door to the front room and told him to come, and he entered, crossed to the red leather chair, sat, and aimed his eyes at Wolfe. "I should explain," he said, "that I am here as a friend of Miss Mira Holt, but she didn't send me."

Wolfe nodded. "She mentioned your name last evening. She said you are an intelligent man."

"I'm afraid she flatters me." Evidently it was normal for him to sit still. "I have come to you for information, but I can't pretend I have any special right to it. I can only tell you why I want it. When I learned on the radio this morning that Miss Holt was in custody I started downtown to see her, to offer my help, but on the way I decided that it wouldn't be advisable because it might be misconstrued, since I am merely a friend.

"So I called on my lawyer instead. His name is John H. Darby. I explained the situation and asked him to see Miss Holt, and he arranged to see her and has talked with her, but she won't tell

him anything. She even refused to authorize him to arrange bail for her. She says that Archie Goodwin and Nero Wolfe are representing her, and she will say nothing and do nothing without their advice."

I touched my lips with a fingertip, the lips that Mira had kissed. I was blowing the kiss back to her. Not only had she put my name first, but also she had improved on my suggestion by combining Method Three and Method One. She was a client in a thousand. She had even turned down two offers to spring her.

"I'm not a lawyer," Wolfe said, "and neither is Mr. Goodwin."

"I'm aware of that. But you seem to have hypnotized Miss Holt. With no offense intended, I must ask, are you acting in her interest or in Waldo Kearns's?"

Wolfe grunted. "Hers. She hired us."

I put in, "You and Kearns agree. He thinks we hypnotized her too. Nuts."

He regarded me. "I prefer to deal with Mr. Wolfe. This is his office."

"You're dealing with both of us," Wolfe told him. "Professionally we are indiscrete. What information do you want?"

"I want to know why you are taking no steps to get her released and what action you intend to take in her interest. I also want you to advise her to accept the services of my lawyer. He is highly qualified."

Wolfe rested his palms on the chair arms. "You should know better, Mr. Irving; you're a man of affairs. Before I gave you an inch, let alone the mile you ask for, I would have to be satisfied that your interest runs with hers."

"Damn it, I'm her friend! Didn't she say I am? You said she mentioned me."

"She could be mistaken." Wolfe shook his head. "No. For instance, I don't even know what you have told the police."

"Nothing. They haven't asked me anything. Why should they?"

"Then you haven't told them that Miss Holt told you on the phone Sunday evening that she was going to drive Judith Bram's cab?"

It got him. He stared. He looked at me and back at Wolfe. "No," he said. "Even if she had, would I tell the police?"

"Do you deny that she did?"

"I neither deny it nor affirm it."

Wolfe upturned a palm. "How the devil can you expect candor

from me? Do you want me to suspect that Miss Holt lied when she told us of that phone call?"

"When did she tell you?"

"Last evening. Here. Not under hypnosis."

He considered. "All right. She told me that."

"And whom did you tell?"

"No one."

"You're certain?"

"Of course I'm certain."

"Then it won't be easy to satisfy me. Assuming Miss Holt fulfilled her intention and took the cab, and arrived with it at Mr. Kearns's address at eight o'clock, and combining that assumption with the fact that at twenty minutes past nine the cab was standing in front of my house with a dead body in it, where are you? Miss Bram states that she told no one of the arrangement. Miss Holt states that she told no one but you. Is it any wonder that I ask where you are? And, specifically, where you were last evening from eight o'clock on?"

"I see." Irving took a breath, and another. "It's utterly preposterous. You actually suspect me of being involved in the murder of Phoebe Arden."

"I do indeed."

"But it's preposterous! I had no concern whatever with Miss Arden. She meant nothing to me. Not only that, apparently whoever killed her managed to get Miss Holt involved—either managed it or permitted it. Would I do that?" He made his hands into fists and raised them, shook them. "Damn it, I have to know what happened! You know. Miss Holt told you. I have to know!"

"There are things I have to know," Wolfe said drily. "I mentioned one: your movements last evening. We have it from your wife, but I prefer it from you. That's the rule, and a good one: get the best available evidence."

Irving was staring again. "My wife? You have seen my wife?"

"Mr. Goodwin has. He called at your home this morning to see you, and you had gone. Your wife wished to be helpful. You know, of course, what she told him."

"Did she tell him—" He stopped and started over. "Did she tell him about a phone call she made yesterday afternoon?"

Wolfe nodded. "And one she received. She received one from you and made one to Miss Arden."

Irving inclined his head forward to look at his right hand. At

length his head came up. "My lawyer wouldn't like this," he said, "but I'm going to tell you something. I have to if I expect you to tell me anything. If I told you what I told my wife you would check it, and it won't check. I know Miss Holt drove Judy Bram's cab there last evening. I know she got there at five minutes to eight and left at ten minutes to nine. I saw her."

"Indeed. Where were you?"

"I was in a cab parked on Carmine Street, around the corner from Ferrell Street. I suppose you know what her purpose was in driving Judy's cab?"

"To talk with her husband."

"I had tried to persuade her not to. Did she tell you that?"

"Yes."

"I didn't like it. There isn't much that Kearns isn't capable of. I don't mean violence; just some trick like getting her out of the cab and going off with it. I decided to be there, and I phoned my wife that I would have to spend the evening with a business associate. I was afraid if I took my car Miss Holt might recognize it, so I got a taxi with a driver I know. Carmine Street is one-way, and we parked where we would be ready to follow when she came out of Ferrell Street. We were there when she arrived, at five minutes to eight. When she came back, nearly an hour later, she was alone. There was no one in the cab. I supposed Kearns had refused to let her drive him, and I was glad of it."

"What then?"

"I went to my club. If you want to check I'll give you the cab driver's name and address. I rang Judy Bram's number, and I rang Miss Holt's number three or four times, but there was no answer. I supposed they were out somewhere together. And this morning I heard the radio and saw the paper." He breathed. "I hope to heaven I won't have to regret telling you this. If it contradicts anything she told you she's right and I'm wrong. I could be lying, you know, for my own protection."

I was thinking: if so you're an expert.

Wolfe's eyes were half closed. "It was dark. How could you know no one was in the cab?"

"There's a light at that corner. I have good eyes and so has the driver. She was going slow, for the turn."

"You didn't follow her?"

"No. There was no point in following her if Kearns wasn't with her."

"What would you say if I told you Miss Holt saw you in your parked taxi as she drove by?"

"I wouldn't believe it. When she drove by arriving, I was flat on the seat. It was dark but I didn't risk her seeing me. When she left she didn't drive by. Carmine Street is one-way."

Wolfe leaned back and shut his eyes, and his lips began to work. Irving started to say something, and I snapped at him, "Hold it." Wolfe pushed his lips out and pulled them in, out and in, out and in. . . . He was earning the twenty-five bucks I had paid him. I had no idea how, but when he starts that lip operation the sparks are flying inside his skull.

Irving tried again. "But I want—"

"Hold it."

"But I don't—"

"Shut up!"

He sat regarding me, not warmly.

Wolfe opened his eyes and straightened. "Mr. Irving." He was curt. "You will get what you came here for, but not forthwith. Possibly within the hour, probably somewhat later. Tell me where I can reach you, or you may—"

"Damn it, no! I want—"

"If you please. Confound it, I've been yelped at enough today. Or you may wait here. That room has comfortable chairs—or one at least. Mr. Goodwin and I have work to do."

"I don't intend—"

"Your intentions have no interest or point. Where can we reach you?"

Irving looked at me and saw nothing hopeful. He arose. "I'll wait here," he said, and headed for the front room.

Having turned my head to see that Irving had shut the door, I turned it back again. "Fine," I said. "We're going to work."

"I'm a dunce," he said. "So are you."

"It's possible," I conceded. "Can you prove it?"

"It's manifest. Why did that policeman stop his car to look inside that cab?"

"Cops do. That's what a prowler car is for. They saw it parked with the hackie gone, and while that's nothing strange they thought it was worth a look. Also it was parked in front of your house. He knew it was your house. He said so."

"Nevertheless, we are dunces not to have questioned it. I want to know if that policeman had been prompted. At once."

"It's a point," I admitted. "The papers haven't mentioned it. I doubt if Cramer would—"

"No."

"I could try Lon Cohen."

"Do so."

I swiveled and dialed the *Gazette* number, and got Lon. Wolfe lifted his receiver to listen in. I told Lon I wanted something for nothing. He said I always did and usually got it; but if what I was after this time was an ad under "Situations Wanted" I would have to pay.

"That was just a dirty rumor," I said. "I am permanently in Mr. Wolfe's employ—permanently, that is, in the sense that I may still be here tomorrow. On our present job we're shy a detail. If you'll supply it I'll give you something for the front page if and when. We don't know whether the cop who stopped to uncover Phoebe Arden's body in the taxi had been steered or was just nosy. Do you?"

"Yes, but I'm not supposed to. The D.A. is saving it. He may release it this afternoon. If he does I'll call you."

"We need it now. Not for publication, and we wouldn't dream of quoting you. We're just curious."

"I'll bet you are. I wish I got paid as much for being curious as Wolfe does. Okay. It was a dialed phone call to Canal six, two thousand. Probably a man, but it could have been a woman trying to sound like a man. It said there was a taxi standing in front of nine-eighteen West Thirty-fifth Street with a dead woman in it. As you know, that address has been heard from before. The sergeant radioed a prowler car."

"Has the call been traced?"

"How? Modern improvements. But you'd better ask the D.A."

"A good idea. I will. Many thanks and I won't forget the front page." I hung up and swiveled. "I'll be damned. Where can we buy dunce caps? For a passerby to see it he would have had to open the door and lift the canvas."

Wolfe's lips were tight. "We should have done that hours ago."

"Lon may not have known hours ago."

"True. Even so. Get Mr. Cramer."

I swiveled and dialed. It wasn't as simple as getting Lon Cohen had been. Cramer was in conference and couldn't be disturbed. I was hacking away at it when Wolfe took his phone and said, "This is Nero Wolfe. I have something that will not wait. Ask Mr.

Cramer if he prefers that I deal with the District Attorney."

In two minutes there was a bark. "What do you want?"

"Mr. Cramer?" He knew darned well it was.

"Yes. I'm busy."

"So am I. Is it true that Miss Holt refuses to talk without advice from Mr. Goodwin or me?"

"Yes, it is, and I was just telling Stebbins to get Goodwin down here. And then I'm going—"

"If you please. Mr. Goodwin and I have decided that it is now desirable for Miss Holt to answer any questions you care to ask—or that it will be after we have had a brief talk with her. Since I must be present and since I transact business only in my own office, it will be pointless for you to send for him. If you want her to talk bring her here."

"You're too late, Wolfe. I don't need her to tell me that she drove that cab to your address. I already know it. Her prints are on the steering wheel and the door, and other places. You're too late."

"Has she admitted it?"

"No, but she will."

"I doubt it. She's rather inflexible. I regret having called you to the phone to no purpose. May I make a request? Don't keep Mr. Goodwin longer than necessary. I am about to conclude a matter in which he has an interest and would like him present. I wanted Miss Holt here too, but since I'm too late I'll have to manage without her."

Silence. Prolonged.

"Are you there, Mr. Cramer?"

"Yes. So you're going to conclude a matter?"

"I am. Soon afterwards Miss Holt and Mr. Goodwin and I will talk not by your sufferance but at our will."

"Are you saying that you know who killed Phoebe Arden?"

"'Know' implies certitude. I have formed a conclusion and intend to verify it. It shouldn't take long. But I'm keeping you. Could you do without Mr. Goodwin until, say, four o'clock? It's half-past twelve. By then we should have finished."

Another silence not quite so long. "I'll be there in fifteen minutes," Cramer said.

"With Miss Holt?"

"Yes."

"Satisfactory. But not in fifteen minutes. I must get Judith

Bram and Waldo Kearns. Do you know where they are?"

"Kearns is at his home. He said he would be if we wanted him again. Judith Bram is here. I'll bring her along, and I'll send for Kearns. Now."

"No. People have to eat. Will you lunch with us? And Miss Holt?"

"I will not. Did you ever skip a meal in your life?"

"Many times when I was younger, by necessity. Then I suggest that you arrive with Miss Holt at two o'clock, and arrange for Miss Bram and Mr. Kearns to come at two thirty. Will that be convenient?"

"By God. Convenient!"

A click. He was off. We hung up. I said, "Probably Irying eats too."

"Yes. Bring him."

I went and got him. He marched to Wolfe's desk and demanded, "Well?"

Wolfe's head slanted back. "I forgot, sir, when I said possibly within the hour, that lunch would interfere. It will be a little longer. I have spoken with Inspector Cramer, and he will arrive with Miss Holt at two o'clock. We shall expect you and your wife to join us at two thirty."

His jaw was working. "Miss Holt will be here?"

"Yes."

"Why my wife?"

"Because she has something to contribute. As you know, she had an appointment with Miss Arden which Miss Arden did not keep. That will be germane."

"Germane to what?"

"To our discussion."

"I don't want a discussion. I certainly don't want one with a police Inspector. I told you what I want."

"And you'll get it; sir, but the method and manner are in my discretion. I give you my assurance without qualification that I am acting solely in the interest of Miss Holt, that I expect to free her of any suspicion of complicity in the murder of Phoebe Arden, and that I shall not disclose what you have told me of your movements last evening without your prior permission. Confound it, do I owe you anything?"

"No." His jaw was still working. "I'd rather not bring my wife."

"We'll need her. I can ask Inspector Cramer to send for her."

"No." He breathed. He looked at me and back at Wolfe. "All right. We'll be here." He wheeled and went.

Five of the yellow chairs were in place facing Wolfe's desk, three in front and two behind, and Mira was in the one nearest to Cramer. I had intended the one at my end for her, but Cramer had vetoed it, and since she was his prisoner I hadn't insisted. Of course he was in the red leather chair, and the uninvited guest he had brought along, Sergeant Purley Stebbins, was seated at his right, with his broad burly shoulders touching the wall.

Mira looked fine, considering. Her eyes were a little heavy and the lids were swollen, and her jacket could have stood ironing, and the corners of her mouth pointed down, but I thought she looked fine. Wolfe, seated behind his desk, was glowering at her, but the glower wasn't meant for her. It was merely that he had had to tell Fritz to advance the lunch hour fifteen minutes, and then had had to hurry through the corn fritters and sausage cakes and wild-thyme honey from Greece and cheese and blackberry pie with not enough time to enjoy it properly.

"Was it bad?" he asked her.

"Not too bad," she said. "I didn't get much sleep. The worst was when the morning passed and I didn't hear from you." Her head turned. "Or you, Mr. Goodwin."

I nodded. "I was busy earning my fee. I wasn't worried about you because you had promised you wouldn't forget Method Three."

"I kept my promise."

"I know you did. I'll buy you a drink any time you're thirsty."

"Get on," Cramer growled.

"Have you been told," Wolfe asked her, "that others will join us shortly?"

"No," she said. "Here? Who?"

"Miss Bram, Mr. Kearns, and Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert Irving."

Her eyes widened. "Why Mr. and Mrs. Irving?"

"That will appear after they arrive. I thought you should know they're coming. They'll soon be here, and we have two points to cover. First, I need a question answered. When you drove away from Ferrell Street last evening, and meandered in search of a place to dispose of the corpse—don't interrupt me—and finally drove here, did you at any time suspect that you were being followed by another car?"

Her mouth was hanging open. "But you—" she stammered. Her

head jerked to me. "Did you know he was—what good did it do to keep my promise?"

"A lot," I told her. "Yes, I knew he was. Everything is under control. Believe me, I would rather lose an arm than lose the right to ask you to promise me something. We know what we're doing. Shall I repeat the question?"

"But—"

"No buts. Leave it to us. Shall I repeat the question?"

"Yes."

I did so, omitting the "don't interrupt me."

"No," she said.

"Proceed," Wolfe told me.

I knew it would have been better to have her closer. She was six yards away. "This one is more complicated and more important. During that drive, from Ferrell Street to here, are you certain that another car was *not* following you? There are various ways of making sure of that. Did you use any of them?"

"No. I never thought of that. I was looking for a place—"

"I know you were. All we want is this: if I told you that a car was following you, all the way, what would you say?"

"I would want to know who it was."

I wanted to go and pat her on the head, but it might have been misconstrued. "Okay," I said. "That's one point. The other one is simple. Tell Inspector Cramer what you told us last night, including the phone call to Gilbert Irving to tell him that you were going to drive Judy's cab." I looked at my wrist. "You only have fifteen minutes, so tell it off."

"I won't," she said. "Not until you tell me why you're doing this."

"Then I'll tell him. You'll know why after the others get here. I'll tell you this: someone tried to frame you for murder and this is payday. Anyway, there's not much left, now that the Inspector knows you drove the cab here with the corpse in it. Would we have spilled that if we didn't have a good hold? Go ahead."

Wolfe put in, "Don't interrupt with questions, Mr. Cramer. They can wait. Yes, Miss Holt?"

She still didn't like it, not a bit, but she delivered, starting with Sunday evening. She left gaps. She didn't say that Judy had given her permission to take the cab, merely that she had taken it, and she didn't mention the phone call to Irving; but since I had already mentioned it that didn't matter. The main thing was what

had happened after she got to Ferrell Street with the cab, and she covered that completely; and when she got to where she and I had sat on the stoop and talked, Cramer began the questions.

I will not say that he was more interested in tagging me for obstructing justice than he was in solving a murder case, since I don't like to brag, but it sounded like it. He was firing away at her, and Sergeant Stebbins was scrawling in his notebook, when the doorbell rang and I went to answer it. It was Waldo Kearns. When I took him to the office he went to Mira, without so much as a glance for the three men, and put out a hand.

"My dear wife," he said.

"Don't be ridiculous," Mira said.

I can't report whether he handled that as well as he had handled the uppercut by Irving because the bell rang again and I had to leave them, to admit Judy Bram. She had an escort, a Homicide dick I only knew by sight, and he thought he was going to enter with her and I didn't, and while we were discussing it she slipped in and left it to us. We were still chatting when a taxi stopped out front and Mr. and Mrs. Irving got out and headed for the steps. The dick had to give them room to pass, and I was able to shut the door on him without flattening his nose. Since it was quite possible that Irving's appearance would start something I entered the office on their heels.

Nothing happened. Mira merely shot him a glance and he returned it. Kearns didn't even glance at him. The newcomers stood while Wolfe pronounced their names for Cramer and Stebbins and told them who Cramer and Stebbins were, and then went to the two chairs still vacant, the two nearest my desk. Mrs. Irving took the one in front, with Judy between her and Mira, and her husband took the one in back of her, which put him only a long arm's length from Waldo Kearns.

As Wolfe's eyes moved from right to left, stopping at Mira, and back again, Cramer spoke. "You understand that this is not an official inquiry. Sergeant Stebbins and I are looking on. You also understand that Mira Holt is under arrest as a material witness. If she had been charged with murder she wouldn't be here."

"Why isn't she out on bail?" Judy Bram demanded. "I want to know why—"

"That will do," Wolfe snapped. "You're here to listen, Miss Bram, and if you don't hold your tongue Mr. Goodwin will drag you out. If necessary Mr. Stebbins will help."

"But why—"

"No! One more word and out you go."

She set her teeth on her lip and glared at him. He glared back, and decided she was squelched.

"I am acting," he said, "jointly with Mr. Goodwin, on behalf of Miss Holt. At our persuasion she has just told Mr. Cramer of her movements last evening. I'll sketch them briefly. Shortly after seven thirty she took Miss Bram's cab and drove it to Ferrell Street and parked at the mouth of the alley leading to Mr. Kearns's house. She expected him to appear but he didn't. At eight thirty she left the cab, went through the alley to the house, knocked several times, and looked in windows. Getting no response she returned to the cab, having been gone about ten minutes. There was a dead body in the cab, a woman, and she recognized her. It was Phoebe Arden. I will not—"

"You fat fool!" Judy blurted. "You're a fine—"

"Archie!" he commanded.

I stood up. She clamped her teeth on her lip. I sat down.

"I will not," Wolfe said, "go into her thought processes, but confine myself to her actions. She covered the body and drove away. Her intention was to dispose of her cargo in some likely spot, and she drove around in search of one, but found none. I omit details—for instance, that she rang the number of Miss Bram from a phone booth and got no answer. She decided she must have counsel, drove to my house, met Mr. Goodwin on the stoop, and gave him a rigmarole about a bet she had made. Since he is vulnerable to the attractions of personable young women, he swallowed it."

I swallowed *that*. I had to, with Cramer sitting there.

"Now," Wolfe said, "a crucial fact. I learned it myself less than three hours ago. Only a few minutes after Miss Holt and Mr. Goodwin met on the stoop someone phoned police headquarters to say that a taxi standing in front of this address had a dead woman in it. That is—"

"Where did you get that?" Cramer demanded.

Wolfe snorted. "Pfui. Not from you or Mr. Stebbins. That is proof, to me conclusive, that the murderer of Phoebe Arden had no wish or need for her to die. Phoebe Arden was killed only because her corpse was needed as a tool for the destruction of another person—a design so coldblooded and malign that even I am impressed. Whether she was killed in the cab, or at a nearby

spot and the body taken to the cab, is immaterial. The former is more likely, and I assume it.

"What did the murderer do? He entered the cab with Phoebe Arden the moment Miss Holt disappeared in the alley, coming from their hiding place in the stoneyard across the street. Having stabbed his victim—or rather his tool—he walked up Ferrell Street and around the corner to where his car was parked on Carmine Street. Before going to his car he stood near the corner to see if Miss Holt, on returning to the cab, removed the body before driving away. If she had, he would have found a booth and phoned police headquarters immediately."

Cramer growled, "What if Kearns had come out with Miss Holt?"

"He knew he wouldn't. I'll come to that. You are assuming that Kearns was not the murderer."

"I am assuming nothing."

"That's prudent. When Miss Holt turned the cab into Carmine Street and drove on, he followed her. He followed her throughout her search for a place to get rid of the corpse, and on to her final destination, this house. Some of my particulars are assumption or conjecture, but not this one. He must have done so, for when she stopped here he drove on by, found a phone booth, and made the call to the police. The only other possible source of the call was a passerby who had seen the corpse in the cab as it stood at the curb, and a passerby couldn't have seen it without opening the door and lifting the canvas." His eyes went to Cramer. "Of course that hadn't escaped you."

Cramer grunted.

Wolfe turned a hand over. "If his objective was the death of Phoebe Arden, why didn't he kill her in the stoneyard—they must have been there, since there is no other concealment near—and leave her there? Or if he did kill her there, which is unlikely, why did he carry or drag the body to the cab? And why, his objective reached, did he follow the cab in its wanderings and at the first opportunity call the police?

"I concede the possibility that he had a double objective, to destroy both Miss Arden and Miss Holt, but if so Miss Holt must have been his main target. To kill Miss Arden, once he had her in the stoneyard with a weapon at hand, was simple and involved little risk; to use her body as a tool for the destruction of Miss Holt was a complicated and daring operation, and the risks were

great. I am convinced that he had a single objective—to destroy Miss Holt."

"Then why?" Cramer demanded. "Why didn't he kill *her*?"

"I can only conjecture, but it is based on logic. Because it was known that he had reason to wish Miss Holt dead, and no matter how ingenious his plan and adroit its execution, he would have been suspected and probably brought to account. I have misstated it. That's what he did. He devised a plan so ingenious that he thought he would be safe."

Purley Stebbins got up, circled around the red leather chair, and stood at Waldo Kearns's elbow.

"No, Mr. Stebbins," Wolfe said. "If you want to guard a murderer, stand by *Mrs. Irving*."

Knowing that was coming any second, I had my eye on her. She was only four feet from me. She didn't move a muscle, but her husband did. He put a hand to his forehead and squeezed. I could see his knuckles go white. Mira's eyes stayed fixed on Wolfe, but Judy and Kearns turned to look at *Mrs. Irving*. Stebbins did too, but he didn't move.

Cramer spoke. "Who is *Mrs. Irving*?"

"She is present, sir."

"I know she is. Who is she?"

"She is the wife of the man whom Miss Holt called on the phone Sunday evening to tell him that she was going to take Miss Bram's cab, and why. Mr. Irving has stated that he told no one of that call. Either he lied or his wife eavesdropped. Mr. Irving, might your wife have overheard that conversation on an extension?"

Irving's hand left his forehead. He lowered it slowly until it touched his knee. I had him in profile. A muscle at the side of his neck was twitching. "To say that she might," he said slowly and precisely, as if he only had so many words and didn't want to waste any, "isn't saying that she did. You have made a shocking accusation. I hope—" He stopped, leaving it to anybody's guess what he hoped. He blurted, "Ask her!"

"I shall. Did you, madam?"

"No." Her deep strong voice needed more breath behind it. "Your accusation is not only shocking, it's absurd. I told Mr. Goodwin what I did last evening. Hasn't he told you?"

"He has. You told him that your husband had been prevented by a business emergency from keeping a dinner and theater en-

gagement with you, and you had phoned Phoebe Arden to go in his stead, and she agreed. When she didn't appear at the restaurant you rang her number and got no answer, and then went to another restaurant to eat alone, presumably one where you are not known and plausibly would not be remembered.

"After waiting for her at the theater until after nine o'clock you left a ticket for her at the box office and went in to your seat. That sounds impressive, but actually it leaves you free for the period that counts, from half-past seven until well after nine o'clock. Incidentally, it was a mistake to volunteer that account of your movements, so detailed and precise. When Mr. Goodwin reported it to me I marked you down as worthy of attention."

"I told Mr. Goodwin I wanted to help," she said.

"Don't talk," her husband commanded the back of her head. "Let him talk." To Wolfe: "Unless you're through?"

"By no means. I'll put it directly to you, madam. This is how you really spent those hours. You did phone Phoebe Arden yesterday afternoon, but not to ask her to join you at dinner and the theater. You told her of Miss Holt's plan to drive Miss Bram's cab in an effort to have a talk with her husband, and you proposed a prank. Miss Arden would arrange that Mr. Kearns would fail to appear, and if he didn't, Miss Holt would certainly leave the cab to go to his house to inquire. Whereupon you and Miss Arden, from your concealment in the neighboring stoneyard, would go and enter the cab, and when Miss Holt returned she would find you there, to her discomfiture and even consternation."

"You can't prove any of this," Cramer growled.

"No one ever can, since Miss Arden is dead." Wolfe's eyes didn't leave Mrs. Irving. He went on, "I didn't know Miss Arden, so I can't say whether she agreed to your proposal from mere caprice or from an animus for Miss Holt, but she did agree, and went to her doom. The program went as planned, without a hitch. No doubt Miss Arden herself devised the stratagem by which Mr. Kearns was removed from the scene. But at this point I must confess that my case is not flawless. Certainly you would not have been so witless as to let anyone have a hand in your deadly prank—either a cab driver or your private chauffeur. Do you drive a car?"

"Don't answer," Irving commanded her.

"Yes, she does," Judy Bram said, louder than necessary.

"Thank you, Miss Bram. Apparently you *can* speak to the point.

Then you and Miss Arden went in your car, and parked it on Carmine Street—away from the corner in the direction Miss Holt would take when, leaving, she made the turn from Ferrell Street. You walked to the stoneyard and chose your hiding spot, and when Miss Holt left the cab you went and entered it. It is noteworthy that at that point you were committed to nothing but a prank. If Miss Holt had suddenly returned, or if anyone had come close enough to observe, you would merely have abandoned your true objective—a disappointment, but no disaster. As it was, you struck.

"I am not a moralizer, but I permit myself the comment that in my experience your performance is without parallel for ruthlessness and savagery. It appears that Miss Arden was no enemy of yours; she was your friend. She must have been, to join with you in your impish prank; but you needed her corpse for a tool to gratify your mortal hatred for Miss Holt. That was—"

"Her hatred for Miss Holt," Cramer said. "You assume that too?"

"No, indeed. That is established. Miss Bram, speaking of Gilbert Irving you said that when he looks at Miss Holt or hears her voice he has to lean against something to keep from trembling. You didn't specify the emotion that so affects him. Is it repugnance?"

"No. It's love. He wants her."

"Was his wife aware of it?"

"Yes. Lots of people were. You only had to see him look at her."

"That is not true," Irving said. "I am merely Miss Holt's friend, that's all, and I hope she is mine."

Judy's eyes darted at him and returned to Wolfe. "He's only being a husband because he thinks he has to. He's being a gentleman. A gentleman doesn't betray his wife. I was wrong about you. I shouldn't have called you a fat fool. I didn't know—"

Cramer cut in, to Wolfe. "All right, if that isn't established it can be. But it's all that's established. There's damn little you can prove. Do you expect me to charge a woman with murder on your guess?"

You don't often hear a sergeant disagree with an Inspector in public, but Purley Stebbins—no, I used the wrong word. Not hear, see. Purley didn't say a word. All he did was leave his post at Kearns's elbow and circle around Irving to stand beside Mrs. Irving, between her and Judy Bram. Probably it didn't occur to him

that he was disagreeing with his superior; he merely didn't like the possibility of Mrs. Irving's getting a knife from her handbag and sticking it in Judy's ribs.

"There's nothing at all I can prove," Wolfe said. "I have merely exposed the naked truth; it is for you, not me, to drape it with the evidence the law requires. For that you are well equipped; surely you need no suggestions from me; but, item, did Mrs. Irving get her car from the garage yesterday evening? What for? If to drive to a restaurant and then to a theater, in itself unlikely, where did she park it? Item, the knife. If she conceived her prank only after her husband phoned to cancel their engagement, which is highly probable, she hadn't time to contrive an elaborate and prudent plan for getting a weapon. She either bought one at a convenient shop, or she took one from her own kitchen; and if the latter, her cook or maid will have missed it and can identify it. Her biggest mistake, of course, was leaving the knife in the body, even with the handle wiped clean; but she was in a hurry to leave, she was afraid blood would spurt on her, and she was confident that she would never be suspected of killing her good friend Phoebe Arden. Other items—"

Mrs. Irving was up, and as she arose her husband did too, and grabbed her arm from behind. He wasn't seizing a murderer; he was being a gentleman and stopping his wife from betraying herself. She jerked loose, but then Purley Stebbins had her other arm in his big paw. "Take it easy," Purley said. "Just take it easy."

Mira's head dropped and her hands came up to cover her face, and she started to shake. Judy Bram put a hand on her shoulder and said, "Go right ahead, Mi, don't mind us." Waldo Kearns was sitting still, perfectly still. I got up and went to the kitchen, to the extension, and dialed the *Gazette* number. I thought I ought to be as good at keeping a promise as Mira had been.

Yesterday I drove Mira and Judy to Idlewild, where Mira was to board a plane for Reno. Judy and I had tossed a coin to decide whether the trip would be made in the Heron sedan which Wolfe owns and I drive, or in Judy's cab, and I had won. On the way back I remarked that I supposed Kearns had agreed to accept service for a Reno divorce because now it wouldn't leave him free to marry Phoebe Arden.

"No," Judy said. "Because his wife was a witness in a murder trial and that wouldn't do."

A little later I remarked that I supposed she had stopped dreaming about a lion standing on a rock about to spring at her.

"No," she said. "Only now I'm not sure who it is. It could even be you."

A little later I remarked that if the state of New York carried out its program for Mrs. Irving, who was in the death house at Sing Sing, I supposed Mira would get back from Reno just in time for a wedding.

"No," Judy said. "They'll wait at least a year. Gil Irving will always be a gentleman."

Three supposes and all wrong. And still men keep on marrying women.



John D. MacDonald

He Was Always a Nice Boy

A commentary on our times? Judge for yourself...

I just cannot understand how such a thing could happen. It is a nightmare and I guess we have to live with it. Or try to forget it, or something.

Why, Martha and I have known that boy ever since he was a little bit of a tyke. They moved into that house right across there—of course, you already know which one. The white one with the dark red trim and the dark red front door. What year was it, Martha? Forty-eight? That's right. Jimmy was about three then, two years younger than our youngest. Cute little kid. Sort of shy, but nice. You know what I mean. A likable kid. Nothing fresh about him.

You're a psychologist, you say? Well, I hope you people have some sort of an answer for a thing like this. Nobody in the neighborhood has any answer, I can tell you. This is a nice quiet neighborhood. It being a dead-end street helps out.

Well, they moved in in forty-eight like I said. A nice young couple with a three-year-old kid. Joe Bell was working at the heater company then, and Connie was home with the kid. They seemed like nice enough people, you understand, but they never did get what you'd call real friendly with anybody on the block.

They had plenty of friends all right—people they knew before they moved out here. I'm not saying anything against them, these friends of theirs, but they weren't exactly the sort of people who would have fitted in well in this neighborhood. Martha and me, we're not what you'd call prudes. We like a drink once in a while, and we like to go to parties. But they really had some dandies there over at the Bells' house. Until way in the morning, whooping and hollering so you'd wonder how the kid got any sleep, but I suppose he was used to it. Joe would have a hell of a hangover some mornings, but he'd make it to work all right. He's the sort who wants to get ahead.

Back there in forty-eight and forty-nine, that was when women used to come around about every afternoon and they'd play bridge over there. Martha heard they played for some pretty good stakes, too. I remember one time when they first moved in Connie had Jimmy in a sort of harness thing with a loop that went over a wire so he had plenty of leeway to run up and down the side yard. He'd play out there by himself in the afternoons.

It got to raining one day. Not hard. There was the kid out there in the yard and Martha got to fretting about him. I was at work at the time. Anyway, Martha went over and unhooked him out of the harness and took him to the front door. Got sort of snippy about it, didn't she? Connie, I mean. It made Martha feel a little bit like she'd poked her nose in where it wasn't wanted. But there were no hard feelings about it. They were polite after that and we were too.

Now don't get the idea from that that Jimmy was abused. There wasn't anything they wouldn't do for that kid. They kept him dressed up fine, and they fed him well, and he was a healthy kid. You could see that. We heard sort of indirect-like that Connie couldn't have any more kids and that was why they had just the one.

It was in 1950 that Joe Bell quit at the heater company and went over to Julliard Aircraft. They were on Air Force contracts then, and Joe put in a lot of overtime and really began to haul in the money. Jimmy was five then and going to kindergarten. About six months after Joe went to work there, Connie got a job there too. They put Jimmy in a sort of day-nursery deal that kept him all day while Connie was working.

Her hours were different than Joe's, so she got a car of her own and when she came home she'd pick up Jimmy from the day school. That was the year they enlarged the cellar and put in the big recreation room and that was where they had their parties whenever they had a chance. Working agreed with Connie all right. She was a good-looking woman right from the start and when she began to put some of her/earnings on her back she really began to look like something. And they got Jimmy a whole mess of expensive toys. When he was six he had a little car with an electric motor in it and he used to tool it up and down the block.

Jimmy played with our kids a lot. We've always been nuts about picnics in our family, and the kids wanted Jimmy along, so

we'd ask and it was always fine with them for Jimmy to come right along with us. It got so automatic that on Sunday he'd come right along and we even stopped bothering to ask. Mostly because they slept so late on Sundays that you would have to wake them up to ask them.

Right from the beginning Jimmy was a self-reliant little kid. He'd get up on Sunday and he'd make his own breakfast over there, being careful not to make too much noise, and then he'd come over. When the weather was too bad for picnics he'd come on over anyway and he played good with our kids. No scraps and fusses. When he hurt himself that kid wouldn't let out a peep.

Well, Joe and Connie stayed right on at Julliard right up through fifty-five. Jimmy went to the Arthur Donovan School—that's the public grade school just five blocks away from here. Let me see. In fifty-five Jimmy was ten, and he must have been in about the fifth grade. You could tell by talking to the kid that he was bright, but he didn't do too well in school. They said he was dreamy. He'd walk on home with our kids and he'd let himself in over there and fix his own lunch and fool around.

I think about then he was making those airplane models. He'd do good work on them, but he'd never completely finish one. Never get it finished to the point where he could take it out and see if it would fly. That may mean something to you. I don't know. Joe and Connie bought him good kits. The kind with regular little gasoline engines that go in them.

Every summer they'd send him to what I guess is just about one of the best camps for kids in the country. He'd go for the full ten weeks. When I got interested in having our kids go to a camp—you know, just for a couple of weeks because we figure it's good for them—I sent for the catalogue from that camp Jimmy went to. It certainly had everything. Swimming, riding, rifle range, archery, water skiing. But the price would curl your hair. We sent ours to the Y camp, and they seemed to like it fine after they got over being homesick.

Jimmy never had very much to say about the camp. I guess he liked it all right.

Connie quit working in fifty-five. I guess she was laid off along with a lot of the others. She spent some time at home but I guess she was bored. She went out a lot in the afternoon. After a while it got so she was going out just about every day and not getting back until pretty late.

Then we heard about the trouble. I guess it nearly broke up their marriage. It was some guy she had worked with at Juilliard. But somehow Joe and Connie settled their differences and things were all right between them again.

They were never stingy with Jimmy. He always got a big allowance. More than I could afford to give mine. Jimmy didn't throw it around. He'd save it up and buy stuff for himself and then sort of lose interest in what he bought. Then he'd give it away. Usually to my kids. I couldn't see any harm in their accepting.

By the time he was twelve he was a real self-reliant boy. They let him do just about as he pleased. He roamed all over the city on that bike of his. A top-grade English bike with a gear shift and all. He'd go to the movies whenever he felt like it. I tell you it gave me a time with mine because he was younger and he had more freedom than I'd give mine. Jimmy could come back home at any time he pleased, and if he was hungry he always knew where to find food, plenty of it, and he knew how to fix it himself.

Having him so reliant gave Joe and Connie more freedom than we had with ours. When Joe and Connie got a chance to take off for a few days they could go right ahead, and Jimmy was okay to stay home alone and look after himself.

He was always a good kid and a pleasant kid, and nice to be around, but he never did seem to have very much of a sense of fun. You know what I mean? He never acted silly the way kids do. I guess because he was so self-reliant.

There wasn't anything they wouldn't do for that kid. He had the best clothes they could buy him. When he was sixteen—that was in sixty-one—they bought him an almost new convertible for his own. He wasn't careless and reckless with it. He was a good driver for a kid. A good safe driver.

I think it was about then he started seeing less of my kids. He spent a lot more time alone. I don't know where he'd go off to, but sometimes he'd stay away overnight. It didn't seem to worry Joe and Connie too much.

They sent him off to school when he was eighteen, and three months later he was back home. That was the damnedest thing. I don't know what kind of people they have at that college, but they were certainly way off the mark when they said that Jimmy wasn't emotionally mature enough for college. Jimmy had all his emotions under control. Why, he could talk to you just like you were talking to a grownup. It was a pleasure to talk to that kid.

It seemed to me like a kind of a waste when he got that job at the drive-in. A good-looking, bright kid like that. I suppose it means something to you people that he never had a girl, and never had very much to do with girls. I suppose that's what you call significant. He didn't have anything to do with girls until . . . I can't say it and I even hate to think about it.

You take a kid like that. Hard-working parents who did everything in the world for him. Nothing was too good for Jimmy. It makes you wonder.

I see you keep writing things down. I don't see what good I can do you. He was a good kid from a good neighborhood.

Last night Martha and I stayed up a long time, talking about it. What can you say? Even if you could have asked Jimmy about it before he died, I don't think he could have told you why.

What Martha and I said, we said it seems as if there is kind of . . . of an evil thing loose in the world these days. Something terrible and full of hate. Like maybe it lands here from those UFO's. And then it takes over somebody, some ordinary person like Jimmy Bell.

I don't know what Joe and Connie are going to do. They won't answer the door or the phone. Can't blame them, with those reporters and all hanging around. I talked to some of them at first, yesterday, but then they made me mad the questions they asked, like they wanted me to say the kid was a monster or something; wanting to know if I ever noticed him hurting animals or anything like that when he was little.

Well, that third waitress died this morning, but I guess you can say it's a blessing. The other one will recover, they say. Just thinking about it turns my stomach. A knife is a terrible thing.

You know something funny? Peculiar, I mean—sure God not funny. I swear to you as sure as I'm sitting here that if Jimmy heard of anybody killing women like that it would turn his stomach, too.

He was always a good boy.

"Q"

Isaac Asimov

The Matchbook Collector

Join the Black Widowers again . . . In this session the guest is brought by Emmanuel Rubin—one of Rubin's publishers. The publisher, Ronald Klein, had rather casually met a matchbook collector—and "thereby hangs the tale" . . .

Detectives: THE BLACK WIDOWERS

"My wife," said writer Emmanuel Rubin, a tremor of indignation shaking his sparse beard, "has bought another bull."

Discussion of women and, in particular, of wives was considered out of bounds at the staunchly masculine monthly meetings of the deliberately named Black Widowers; but habits die hard. Mario Gonzalo, who was sketching the guest of the meeting, said, "In *your* mini-apartment?"

"It's a perfectly good apartment," said Rubin. "It just *looks* small. And it wouldn't look that small if she didn't have bulls in it made of wood, porcelain, tile, bronze, felt—of everything. She has them from an inch across to a foot across. She has them on the wall, on the shelves, on the floor, and suspended from the ceiling."

At the other end of the table, James Drake, chemist, said to Roger Halsted, mathematician, "What's this I hear about you rewriting the *Iliad* into limericks?"

"One for each book," said Halsted, with obvious self-satisfaction. "The *Odyssey*, too."

"Jeff Avalon recited the limerick to the first book as soon as he saw me."

"I've written one for the second. Would you like to hear it?"

"No," said Drake.

"It goes like this—

Agamemnon's dream strategy slips,
The morale of his troops quickly dips.

First Thersites complains,
But Odysseus restrains,

And we next have the Cat'logue of Ships."

Drake received it stolidly. He said, "You have one too many syllables in the last line."

"Can't help it," said Halsted. "It's impossible to do the second book without mentioning the Catalogue of Ships and that phrase has three unaccented syllables in a row—a-logue-of. I leave one out by elision and say Cat'logue, with an apostrophe. That makes it all fifteen perfect anapests."

Drake shook his head. "Wouldn't satisfy a purist."

Code expert Thomas Trumbull, scowling malevolently, was saying to the waiter, "I hope, Henry, that you noticed I came early today, even though I'm not the host."

"I did, indeed, Mr. Trumbull," said Henry, smiling.

"The least you can do is give the act public approval after what you said about me last time."

"I do approve, sir, but it would be wrong to make an issue of it. That would give the impression that it was hard for you to arrive on time and then no one would expect to have you repeat the feat next time. But if we all ignore it, it will seem as though we take for granted that you can do it, and then you will have no trouble repeating."

"Give me my Scotch and soda, Henry, and spare me the dialectic."

As a matter of fact, it was Rubin who was the host and his guest was one of his publishers, a round-faced, smooth-cheeked gentleman with a good-humored smile. His name was Ronald Klein. Like most guests he found it difficult to hop onto the merry-go-round of talk, so finally he plunged in the direction of the only man at the table he knew.

"Manny," he said, "did you say Jane had bought another bull?"

"That's right," said Rubin. "A cow, actually, because it's sitting on a crescent moon, but it's hard to tell for sure. The makers of these things rarely go into careful anatomical detail."

Geoffrey Avalon, the patent lawyer, who had been wielding his knife and fork in workmanlike fashion over the stuffed veal, paused to say, "Collector's mania is something that seizes almost every gentleman of leisure. It has many delights—the excitement

of the search, the ecstasy of the acquisition, the joy of later contemplation. You can do it with anything. I collect stamps myself."

"Stamps," said Rubin, "are the worst thing you can collect. They are thoroughly artificial. Vest-pocket nations put out issues designed deliberately to fetch high sums: Errors, misprints, and the like create false values. The whole thing is in the hands of entrepreneurs and financiers. If you've got to collect, collect things with no value."

At this point Klein made his way back on the merry-go-round. "I met a fellow yesterday," he said, "who collects matchbooks."

"I collected matchbooks when I was a kid," said Mario Gonzalo, the artist. "I used to go searching all the curbs and alleys for—"

Trumbull, who had been eating in silence, suddenly raised his voice. "Damn it, you bunch of hack-talkers, our guest has said something. Mr.—uh—Klein, what was that you said?"

Klein looked startled. "I said I met a fellow yesterday who collects matchbooks."

Trumbull's creased, bronzed face turned to Klein. "What's the guy's name? The collector?"

"I'm not sure I remember," said Klein. "I met him at lunch yesterday—never saw him before that. There were six of us at the table and he got to talking about his matchbooks. Listen, I thought he was crazy at first, but by the time he got through I decided to start a matchbook collection of my own."

"Did he have grayish sideburns, with a little red in them?" asked Trumbull.

"Why, yes. Do you know him?"

"Umm," said Trumbull. He finished his zabaglione and his teaspoon clinked as he stirred sugar in his coffee. "Tell us more about the matchbooks, Mr. Klein."

Klein looked around the table and said with a small laugh, "There isn't much to tell. I started the whole thing myself, as a matter of fact. We were at the Cock and Bull Restaurant on 53rd Street—"

"Jane insisted on eating there one time because of the name," interrupted Rubin. "Not so hot."

When no one commented, Klein continued. "I started it by lighting a cigarette while we were waiting for the menu, and then feeling uncomfortable about smoking. Seems there's a lot less smoking at meals these days. At this table, for instance, Mr. Drake is the only one smoking. I guess he doesn't mind—"

"I don't," muttered Drake.

"I did, though, so after a few puffs I stubbed out the cigarette. Only I still felt embarrassed, so I fiddled with the matchbook I had used to light the cigarette—you know, the ones restaurants always supply at every table."

"Advertising themselves," said Drake. "Yes."

"And this fellow . . . I remember his name now—Ottowell. I don't know his first name."

"Frederick," growled Trumbull, with glum satisfaction.

"Then you *do* know him."

"I *do* know him. But go on."

"I was still holding the matchbook in my hand, and Ottowell reached for it and asked if he could see it. So I passed it to him. He looked at it and he said something like 'Moderately interesting. Not particularly imaginative in design. I've got it.' Or something like that. I don't remember the exact words."

Halsted said reflectively, "That's an interesting point, Mr. Klein. At least you know you don't remember the exact words. In all these first-person narratives the fellow telling the story always remembers every word everyone has said, and in the right order. It never carries conviction with me."

"Never mind, Roger," said Trumbull impatiently. "This thing is important. Go on, Mr. Klein."

Klein looked even more uncomfortable. "I don't see its importance myself, Mr. Trumbull. There's really not much to it. This Ottowell began to tell us about matchbooks. Apparently, there's a whole thing about it to people who are involved. There are all kinds of factors that increase the value—not only beauty and rarity, but also whether the matches are intact and whether the friction strip is unmarked. He talked about differences in design, in location of the friction strip, in type and quantity of printing, whether the inside of the cover is blank or not, and so on. He went on and on, and that's about it. Except that he made it sound so interesting that it caught my imagination."

"Did he invite you to visit his place and see his collection?"

"No," said Klein, "he didn't."

"I've been there," said Trumbull, and having said that he sat back in his chair with a look of deepest dissatisfaction.

There was a silence. As Henry distributed the small brandy glasses Avalon said, with a touch of annoyance, "Don't stop now, Tom. What was the collector's place like?"

Trumbull seemed to return, as from a distance. "What? Oh—it's weird. He started collecting when he was a kid. For all I know he got his first specimens out of gutters and alleys the way Gonzalo did; but at some point it turned serious.

"He's a bachelor. Doesn't work—doesn't have to. He's inherited some money and has invested shrewdly, so all he lives for are those damned matchbooks. I think *they* own his house and keep *him* on as a caretaker.

"He's got exhibits of prize items on the wall—framed, if you please. He's got them in folders and cases, everywhere. His whole basement is given over to filing cabinets in which the matchbooks are catalogued by type and alphabet. You wouldn't *believe* how many tens of thousands of different matchbooks have been manufactured the world over, with how many different legends, and with how many different peculiarities—and I think he's got them all, every one of them.

"He's got skinny matchbooks that hold only two matches apiece, and some as long as your arm that hold a hundred and fifty. He's got matches shaped like beer bottles, others shaped like baseball bats or bowling pins. He's got blank matchbooks with nothing on the cover; he's got matchbooks with musical scores on them. He's even got pornographic matchbooks!"

"That I'd like to see," said Gonzalo.

"Why?" said Trumbull. "It's the same stuff you can see anywhere else, except that on a matchbook it's handier to burn and get rid of."

Trumbull paused, then looked up and down the table. "Listen, you bunch of meatheads, what's said here is *always* confidential."

"We all know that," said Avalon dryly. "If anyone's forgotten, it's you, or you wouldn't have had to remind us."

"Mr. Klein will also have to—"

Rubin interrupted. "Mr. Klein understands perfectly. He knows that nothing said in this room is ever, under any circumstances, to be referred to outside. I'll vouch for him."

"Okay. All right," said Trumbull, "so now I'll tell you what I can. So help me God, I wouldn't have told you anything except for Klein's luncheon yesterday. I've had this thing chewing holes in me for months now—over a year, in fact; and having it come up—"

"Look," said Drake flatly, "either tell us or don't tell us."

Trumbull rubbed his eyes angrily. "There's an information leak."

"What kind? Where?" said Gonzalo.

"I'm specifically *not* saying it's the government. I'm specifically *not* saying that foreign agents are involved, you understand. *Maybe* it's industrial espionage; *maybe* it's the theft of the New York Mets' baseball signals; *maybe* it's cheating on a test, as in the problem Drake brought up a couple of months ago. Let's call it just an information leak. All right?"

"All right," said Rubin. "Who's involved? This guy Ottiwell?"

"We're pretty sure he is."

"Then reel him in."

Trumbull said, "We have no proof. All we can do is try to block any information from getting to him, and we don't even want to do that—not entirely."

"Why not?"

"Because the problem is not *who* the guy is. It's *how* he does it. If we pull him in without knowing the method he's using, then someone else will simply take his place. People are cheap. It's the *modus operandi* we want."

"Do you have any theories?" asked Halsted.

"The matchbooks. What else? It's got to be. All our evidence points to Ottiwell as the leak and he's a crazy guy who collects matchbooks. There's got to be a connection."

"You mean he started collecting matchbooks so that he could—"

"No, he's been collecting them all his life. There's no doubt about it. The collection he has now took thirty years a-building. But once he had his collection, after he was somehow recruited into the business of transmitting information, he naturally worked out a scheme that involved his matchbooks."

"What scheme?" broke in Rubin impatiently.

"That's what I don't know. But it's there. In a way, the matchbooks are perfect for the task. They carry messages already and properly chosen they need no tampering. For instance, the restaurant you were in yesterday, Klein—the Cock and Bull. Its matchbooks surely said Cock and Bull on the covers."

"Yes, they did."

"Well, now, suppose you want to cancel a previous message. You just put one of those things in the mail, or just tear off half the cover, and mail it. Aren't you saying the previous message was just a cock-and-bull story?"

Gonzalo said, "That's pure bull. —Sorry, Manny, didn't mean to raise a sore point. But look, Tom, anyone who mails a matchbook

cover, let alone a whole matchbook, is asking for it. You spot something funny at once."

"Not if there's a plausible reason to mail matchbooks."

"Like what?"

"Matchbook nuts do it. They correspond and they *trade*. They send matchbooks back and forth. Maybe one guy needs a Cock and Bull to expand an animal collection he's putting together and returns a spare girlie picture for someone who's specializing in that kind of art."

"Ottowell trades?" asked Avalon.

"Of course he does. I'm sure of it."

"And you never managed to pick up anything he mailed?"

A look of contempt passed over Trumbull's face. "Of course we did! A number of times. We'd pick it up, go over it with a fine-tooth comb, then send it on. Now, you know my field is codes and ciphers. You know I'm consulted by the government and have my contacts there. Naturally they're interested. They would be even if the leak involved only a case of over-the-fence gossip, and I'm not saying it's any more than that."

"Why?" said Rubin. "Are we that close to Big Brotherism?"

"It's simple if you'll stop to think. Any system for transmitting information that can't be broken—whatever the information is—is topflight dangerous. If it works and is being used for something utterly unimportant, it can be used later to deal with something vital. The government doesn't want any system of transmitting information to remain unbroken, unless it's under its own control. That's got to make sense to you."

"All right," said Drake, "so you studied the matchbooks this Ottowell puts in the mail. What did you learn?"

"Nothing," grunted Trumbull. "We studied those damned advertising items on each cover and came up with nothing."

"You mean you looked to see if the initial letters spelled out a word or something," said Klein.

"If it was a six-year-old boy sending it, yes, that's what we would have tried. —No, we worked a lot more subtly and still came up with nothing."

"Well," said Avalon, "if you couldn't find anything in the printed matter of the matchbooks he mails, maybe it's a false lead."

"You mean maybe it's not the matchbooks at all?"

"That's right," said Avalon. "It could be all misdirection. This

man has the matchbooks handy and he's a *bona-fide* collector, so he makes his collection look as prominent as possible to attract all the attention he can. He shows it to anyone who wants to see it—"

"I know what you mean, Jeff. He talked to Klein yesterday about the matchbooks; he'd talk to anyone. He'd show his collection to anyone willing to go out to Queens. That's why I asked if he invited Klein up to his place. With all that talking, all that self-advertisement, it wouldn't surprise you if he then used some device that had nothing at all to do with the matchbooks. Right?"

"Right," said Avalon.

"Wrong," said Trumbull. "I just don't believe it. He's the real thing. He's *really* a matchbook nut with nothing else in his life. He has no ideological reason to run the terrible risk he's actually running. He isn't committed to the side for which he's working, whether it's national, industrial, or local—and I'm not saying which. He lacks any interest in that. It's only the matchbooks. He's worked out a new method of using his damned matchbooks and that's the glory of it so far as he's concerned."

"Listen," said Drake, coming out of a reverie. "How many matchbooks does he mail at a time?"

"Who can say? The parcels we've intercepted have never contained more than eight. And he doesn't really mail them often, I have to admit that."

"All right. How much information can he get across in a few matchbooks? He can't use the messages literally and directly. If he tried to do the Cock and Bull bit to cancel a message, my kid nephew could spot him, let alone you. So it's something subtle and maybe each matchbook can work out to one word, or maybe only to one letter. How much can you do with that?"

"Plenty," said Trumbull. "What do you think is needed in these cases? An encyclopedia? Whoever is looking for information has almost all of it to begin with. There's just some key point missing and that's all that's needed."

"For instance, suppose we're back in World War II. Germany has rumors that something big is going on in the United States. A message arrives with only two words on it: atom bomb. What more does Germany need? Sure, no atom bomb existed at the time, but any German with a high school education would get the idea from those two words and any German physicist would get a damned good idea. Then a second message arrives saying, 'Oak

Ridge, Tenn.' That would be a total of twenty individual letters in the two messages and it could have changed the history of the world."

"You mean this guy, Ottiwell, is putting across information like that?" demanded Gonzalo, in awe.

"No! I told you he wasn't," said Trumbull, annoyed. "He isn't important at all in that way. Do you think I would be talking to you about it if he were? It's just the *modus operandi* could be used for that as well as for anything else, and that's why we have to break it. Besides, there's my reputation. I say he's using the matchbooks but I can't show how. You think I like that?"

Gonzalo said, "Maybe there's secret writing on the inside of the matchbooks?"

"We tested for that routinely. If that's it, why bother using matchbooks? It could be done in ordinary letters and attract a lot less attention. It's a matter of psychology. If Ottiwell is going to use matchbooks, he's going to use a system that can be used *only* on matchbooks, and that means he's using only the messages that are on them already—somehow."

Klein interrupted. "Imagine my starting all this by merely mentioning yesterday's lunch. Do you have a list of the matchbooks he sent off? Perhaps we could all look at it—"

"And work out a code that I couldn't. Right?" said Trumbull. "You know ever since Conan Doyle pitted Sherlock Holmes against the Scotland Yard bunglers, there seems to be a notion that the professional can't do anything. I assure you, if I can't—"

Avalon said, "Well, now, how about Henry?"

Henry, who had been listening gravely, with a look of interest on his unlined, sixtyish face, smiled briefly and shook his head.

But a look of deep thought came over Trumbull's face. "Henry," he said. "I forgot about Henry. You're right, Jeff. He's the smartest man here, which would ordinarily be a compliment, if you weren't all a pack of prize imbeciles."

"Henry," he said, "you're the honest man. You can see the dishonesty of the world without having it blurred by your own larcenous yearnings. Do you agree with me? Do you think this Ottiwell, if he were going to engage in this kind of work, would do so only by using his matchbooks in a way that would make them uniquely useful?"

"As a matter of fact, Mr. Trumbull," said Henry, "I agree with you."

Trumbull smiled. "Here we have the word of a man who knows what he's talking about."

"Because he agrees with you," said Rubin.

"I don't *entirely* agree with Mr. Trumbull, to be sure," said Henry. "May I—make a little speech?"

"Go ahead," came from the rest in chorus.

"Thank you," said Henry. "I listen to you gentlemen on the occasion of all your monthly meetings with the greatest interest. It is obvious to me that all of you get enormous pleasure out of talking. But you are not as good at listening, so you may have missed a most important point. Since it is not my place to talk—ordinarily—I seem to have heard what the rest of you did not. Consequently, I would like to ask Mr. Klein a few questions. The answers may prove to be of no help, but there is a small chance—" He paused, then said softly, "Mr. Klein?"

"Yes, Henry," said Klein, a pleased flush crossing his face at suddenly becoming the center of attention.

"It's just this, Mr. Klein. When you began to tell, rather briefly, the story of your lunch yesterday, you said something like—and I can't repeat the exact words either—you thought he was crazy, but he made everything sound so interesting that by the time he was through you decided to start a collection of matchbooks of your own."

"That's right," said Klein. "Sort of silly, I suppose. I certainly wouldn't do anything at all like his deal. I don't mean the spying; I mean this huge collection of his—"

"Yes," said Henry, "but the impression I got was that you were driven to an impulse of collecting right on the spot. Did you by any chance pick up a Cock and Bull matchbook at the conclusion of the lunch? Perhaps to start your own collection?"

"That's right," said Klein.

"From which table, sir?"

"From our own."

"You mean you took the matchbook you had been holding and had passed on to Ottiwell. It was put back on the table eventually and you picked it up."

"Yes," said Klein, suddenly defensive. "Nothing wrong with that, is there?"

"Absolutely not, sir. We have matchbooks on this table too. But, Mr. Klein, just what did you do with the matchbook after you picked it up?"

Klein thought a bit. "I don't know. It's hard to remember. I put it in my jacket pocket, I think, or in my coat pocket after we got our overcoats."

"Did you do anything with it after you got home?"

"No, I forgot all about it. All this matchbook stuff passed out of my head till Manny Rubin mentioned his wife collecting bulls."

"You're not wearing the same jacket now, are you?"

"No. But I'm wearing the same overcoat."

"Would you look in the coat pocket and see if you have the Cock and Bull matchbook there?"

Klein vanished into the private cloakroom used by the Black Widowers.

"What are you getting at, Henry?" asked Trumbull.

"Probably nothing," said Henry. "I'm playing a long shot even though we've already had one this evening."

"Which is that?"

"That Mr. Klein had lunch with a man who turns out to be someone you've been stalking. Asking for two long shots, one after the other, is a bit much, perhaps."

"Here it is," said Klein joyously, returning with a small object held high. "I've got it."

He tossed it on the table and everyone rose to look at it. It said Cock and Bull on it and there was the small picture of a bull's head, with a rooster perched on one horn. Gonzalo reached for it.

"If you please, Mr. Gonzalo," said Henry. "I don't think anyone ought to touch it yet. —Mr. Klein, this is the matchbook that was at your table; the one you used to light a cigarette and which Mr. Ottiwell then used to demonstrate some points about the place where the friction strip is located and so on."

"Yes."

"And he put it down and you picked it up?"

"Yes."

"Did you happen to notice how many matches were in the matchbook when you lit your cigarette?"

Klein looked surprised. "I don't know. I didn't pay any attention."

"But in any case, you tore off one match to light your cigarette?"

"Yes."

"So that even if it were a full book of matches to begin with, there would be at least one match missing now. Since this looks

like a standard restaurant matchbook, with thirty matches, there can't be more than twenty-nine matches in it right now."

"I suppose so."

"And how many matches are there in the book now? Would you look and see?"

Klein opened the matchbook. He stared at it for quite a while, then said, "It hasn't been touched. It's got all thirty matches in it. Let me count them. —Yes, there are thirty."

"But you did pick it up from your table and you did think it was the matchbook you had used? You didn't pick it up from another table?"

"No, it was our matchbook. Or at least I was convinced it was."

"All right. If you gentlemen would care to look at it now, please do so. If you'll notice, there is no mark on the friction strip, no sign of any match having been lit."

Trumbull said, "You mean Ottiwell substituted this matchbook for the one on the table?"

"I thought such a thing was possible as soon as you said he was passing information, Mr. Trumbull. I agreed with you, Mr. Trumbull, that Mr. Ottiwell would make use of matchbooks. The psychology seemed sound to me. But I agreed with Mr. Avalon that indirection might also be used. It's just that Mr. Avalon did not quite see the possible subtlety of the indirection."

"Being too crooked myself to see clearly," sighed Avalon, "I know."

"By concentrating on his collection," said Henry, "and on his mailing and receiving matchbooks, he had you quite firmly pinned there, Mr. Trumbull. Yet it seemed to me that Mr. Ottiwell was not involved with matchbooks *only* in regard to his collection. Every time he ate in a decent restaurant, which could be often, he would be near a matchbook. Even if he were with others, it would be easy for him to substitute another matchbook for the one already on the table. Once he and the rest of the party left, a confederate could pick it up."

"Not this time," said Rubin sardonically.

"No, not this time. When the party left, the table was empty of matchbooks. This leads to some bothersome thoughts. —Have you been followed, Mr. Klein?"

Klein looked alarmed, "No! At least—at least—I don't know. I haven't noticed anyone."

"Any pocket-picking attempts?"

"No. None that I know of."

"In that case, they may not be sure who took it—after all, there were four others at the table besides yourself and Ottiwell. Or else they may think a lost matchbook will cause far less trouble than an attempt at retrieval. Or else I'm all wrong from beginning to end."

Trumbull said, "Don't worry, Klein. I'll arrange to have an eye kept on you for a while. I see the point you're making, Henry. There are dozens of these matchbooks in any given restaurant at any given time, all of them identical. Ottiwell could easily have picked up one or two on a previous visit—or a dozen, if he wanted that many—and then used them as substitutes. Who would notice? Who would care? And are you suggesting now that a single substitute matchbook could carry all the information?"

"It would seem a very strong possibility to me," said Henry.

"But how would it work?" said Trumbull. He turned the matchbook from side to side between his fingers. "It's only one matchbook, just like all the rest. It says Cock and Bull on it, plus an address and a phone number. Where would there be any information on this one as opposed to others?"

"We would have to look in the exactly right place," said Henry.

"And where would that be?" said Trumbull.

"I go by what you said, sir," said Henry. "You said Mr. Ottiwell would be sure to use the matchbook in a way that would involve its unique qualities, and I agree. But what is unique about the message that matchbooks carry? In almost every case it is just advertising matter, and you'll find such matter in almost any number of other places from cereal boxtops to the inside covers of magazines."

"Well, then?"

"Only one thing is truly unique about a matchbook—and that is the matches it contains. In the standard restaurant matchbook there are thirty matches that seem to be arranged in a staggered set of four rows. If you study the bottom of the matches, though, you will see that there are only two pieces of cardboard, from each of which arise fifteen matches. If you count from left to right, first the back row—as you look at them with the flap open—and then the other rows, you can give each match a definite and unequivocal number—from one to thirty."

"Yes," said Trumbull, "but all the matches are identical with

each other and with the matches in other matchbooks of the same kind. The matches in this particular matchbook are absolutely standard."

"But do the matches have to stay identical, sir? Suppose you took out one match—any one match. There would be thirty different ways of taking out one match. If you took out two matches, or three, there would be many more ways."

"No matches are missing in this book."

"Just a manner of speaking. Tearing out matches would be far too crude a method. Suppose certain matches had pinholes in them, or little scratches, or a tiny drop of fluorescent paint on the tips that would show up under ultra-violet light. With thirty matches, how many different patterns could you produce by marking any number, from none at all to all thirty?"

"I'll tell you that," interrupted Halsted. "Two to the thirtieth power, which comes to—oh, one and a quarter billion; that's *billion*, not million. And if you also marked or didn't mark the flap just behind the matches, you would double that to two and a half billion."

"Well," said Henry, "if you could give a particular matchbook any number from zero to two and a half billion, such numbers could encode considerable information."

"As many as six words easily," said Trumbull thoughtfully. "Damn!" he shouted, jumping to his feet. "Give me that thing. I'm leaving."

He ran to the cloakroom and was back fumbling into his coat and shouting, "Get your coat, Klein, you're coming with me. I need your statement and you'll be safer with me."

Henry said, "I may be quite wrong, sir."

"Wrong, hell! You're right—I *know* you are. The whole thing fits a few other items you don't know about. —Henry, would you consider getting involved in this sort of thing? I mean, professionally."

"Hey," shouted Rubin, "don't you go taking Henry away from us."

"No fear, Mr. Rubin," said Henry softly. "I find it much more exciting here."

"Q"

Berkely Mather

The Big Bite

"The real professional never takes a lot of little bites. He takes one big one, and leaves it alone thereafter. Coming back again and again can have awkward repercussions. People can be driven to do silly things—they sometimes leave notes to coroners and the police."

A suspenseful yarn by one of England's most expert mystery writers . . .

When the ancient taxi had lurched and rattled to the crest of the hill, Fenton could see the cliff-enclosed cove below. There was a sandy beach, perhaps 300 yards long, and behind it, the house. The grounds ran back up the slope to the downland, smooth-turfed and landscaped, and they were shielded to the north and east by a belt of timber. A stone jetty ran out from the beach, curving at the end to form a breakwater, and to it was moored a long, lean, white motor cruiser.

The taxi driver caught Fenton's eye in the rear-view mirror. He grinned—grudging admiration tempering raw envy—and said, "Aye, got it all, our Mr. Coomber, ain't he? Wait till you see the house though. Reckon it cost thirty-five thousand pound to build—apart from the grounds and the beach and all. And that was ten year ago."

Fenton didn't answer, so the driver went on, "Will I be coming back for you? There's only one fast train to London this afternoon. That'll be at four."

"I'll phone the railway station if I want you," Fenton said shortly, and then they had entered the drive and were sweeping up toward the house.

"Is it Mr. Coomber himself you'll be wanting," the driver asked, "or Mr. Garcia?"

"Who's Mr. Garcia?" Fenton looked a little startled.

"He's the butler. Spanish," the driver explained, and Fenton smiled twistedly.

"I see what you mean," he said. "We'll skip the butler. Mr. Coomber and I are old friends."

"Didn't mean to be cleverlike," the driver said hastily, thinking of his tip. "It's just that I got chewed up rotten for taking a business gent to the wrong door last week."

Fenton paid him off, waiting for his change, and tipping him the bare minimum, then walked up the steps. The double plate-glass doors opened before he had a chance to ring, and a small simian figure in a white jacket stood before him, holding a silver salver.

"Never mind my card," said Fenton, his self-possession now back with him. "Just tell Mr. Coomber that Mr. Charles Wentworth Fenton, late of Haddersleigh, is here."

The butler bowed, put down the salver, and held his hand out for Fenton's hat, but the latter, fully aware of its sweat-stained band and torn lining, pitched it onto a sofa, thrust his hands into his jacket pockets, whistled softly, and looked around the hall with casual, almost bored, half interest. The butler hesitated a moment, then bowed again, slightly more perfunctorily, crossed the hall, and walked down a passage. He did not ask Fenton to be seated.

Left alone, Fenton crossed to a mirror over the fireplace that reflected a vista of sunlit garden and the beach and sea beyond it. He straightened his Old Haddersleigh tie, tucking the slightly frayed edge under the knot out of sight, then smoothed his graying hair down with both palms.

"Ex-gent," he murmured to himself. "Rather the worse for wear, but still reasonably serviceable. Savile Row suit—a bit tatty round the seat and elbows if viewed in a strong light. Shoes run down at the heels—but beautifully shined. Could be a former officer—short on bank balance but long on pride. *Could* be."

And then the butler was back. "The senor asks you to his study, sir," he said, and led the way.

"But didn't come to ask himself," thought Fenton wryly, padding after the other over Persian rugs that littered the polished floors like autumn leaves.

Coomber rose from behind the ping-pong-table-sized desk and said, "Fenton!" in tones of mild surprise. "Let's see, it must be—?"

"Twenty-five, thirty years," Fenton supplied. "Let's not depress

each other. A hell of a long time, anyhow. And it's treated you well, Porky." They shook hands and Fenton dropped into the deep visitor's chair that faced the light and gave the other the advantage.

"Porky, eh?" said Coomber a little distantly. "I haven't heard that for many a long day." He slapped his midriff. "Do something about it now. Golf and tennis when I can find the time. A good masseur when I can't. But tell me, what brings you to this part of the country?"

"A spot of business." Fenton shrugged.

"Wish you could have let me know in advance," Coomber said. "We might have had lunch. As it is, my wife's away and I'm due out in"—he glanced at his watch—"very shortly." And then, so there would be no mistake about it, he added, "But I can just stretch it to the extent of one glass of sherry," and reached for the bell.

"Not for me, thanks," Fenton said.

"Then I won't bother either," said the other, relieved. "Tell me, what do you do for a living nowadays?"

"This and that," Fenton answered. "A bit of free-lance journalism at the moment."

Coomber raised his eyebrows slightly. "Any money in that?"

"Damn little," Fenton told him. "But beggars can't be choosers. One rather loses touch in prison."

There was a moment of silence, then Coomber looked at his watch again and said, "Oh—er—quite. Well, look here, I'm afraid I really must scoot now." He felt for his wallet and extracted a five-pound note. "Er—if this would help—"

"Shove it," said Fenton quietly.

"As you wish," said Coomber with icy dignity. "But I must ask you not to call here again. I try to keep this place as a retreat from the cares and worries of London, and—"

"And you don't want jailbirds giving the dump a bad name." Fenton grinned. "I should have explained that the prison was a Jap one in Burma, during the war. I was a P.O.W."

"Damn you, Fenton," fumed the other, wiping his brow. "That wasn't funny." He laughed sheepishly. "Quite had me going for the moment. Fenton the Joker. You haven't changed much since our Haddersleigh days. Remember the grass snake in the science master's bedroom? —What was his name?"

"Mr. Ellis was the master's name. The snake was called Horace."

"And the stinkbombs in the chapel organ pipes?"

"You bet—and the bottle I crowned a policeman with in Piccadilly the night of the Haddersleigh Reunion Dinner—and got fined twenty-five quid for—and fired out of the Company by your father—"

Coomber halted Fenton in mid-reminiscence and smiled sadly.

"Yes, rather unfortunate that," he said. "But you know what a Victorian stickler the old man was."

"You're damn right I do," Fenton agreed. "I had reason to know—and to remember—considering it wrecked my whole career."

"Oh, come now," Coomber protested. "Not as bad as all that. You got another job."

"Almost immediately. War was declared a couple of weeks later and I enlisted."

"Yes, so I heard."

"You bet you heard. I wrote and told you—and asked you to intercede with your father after it was over—if I came through in one piece. You didn't even answer."

"Probably never received the letter," Coomber said. "Damn it all, surely you remember what those early war days were like. Everybody scuttling round like—"

"Like bloody rabbits trying to dodge the draft. Sure, I remember that too."

"If that was meant for me," said Coomber with dignity, "I'd like to point out that I made several attempts to get into uniform—but I was turned down because the Company was engaged on defense work of national importance. I think you've got a chip on your shoulder, Fenton. Bit pointless after all these years, isn't it? After all, I got you the job in the first place, but it was my father who fired you. Why pick on *me*?"

"I'm not. You started the 'I remember, I remember' spiel, not me. I was just tagging along."

Coomber rose pointedly. "Well, it's been pleasant meeting you again, but I really must excuse myself now."

"Sit down," Fenton told him grimly. "I said I had business in these parts. I have. With you."

"I can't think of any business I would be likely to have with you—" Coomber began.

Fenton said, "Dolly Pereira."

Coomber sat down hurriedly and stared at him.

"Yes, you heard me," Fenton said. "Dolly Pereira."

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about," Coomber said, and there was the slightest shake in his voice.

"I gave you the name," said Fenton. "Now, do you want to discuss it further or would you prefer to leave it to a couple of Scotland Yard dicks—plus another couple, probably wearing turbans? Up to you."

Coomber sat staring at the blotting pad before him, his fingers beating a tattoo on the morocco desk top. "Go on."

"I'll be as brief as I can," Fenton said. "No dice from you after two or three letters, so I called the office one day from the training camp I was in up Yorkshire way. They told me you'd been sent out to take charge of the Bombay branch of the Company—so that was it. I wrote you off as a heel and forgot about things—until December 1941, when I found myself on a troopship in Bombay harbor. We had been given a twenty-four-hour shore leave before continuing on our way to Singapore."

"I thought I'd have one last shot at seeing you, so I called at the office—in Hornby Road. They told me there that you'd shifted your own office up to Poona, to be nearer the big military installations the Company was doing business with. It was a two-hour run by train to Poona, so I thought I'd get it out of my system once and for all. I went up. You weren't there, but I saw a little Goanese clerk—fellow by the name of Braganza. That mean anything to you?"

Coomber nodded and moistened his lips.

"He wasn't helpful," Fenton went on. "In fact, he was almost rude, so I bawled him out—and he burst into tears and apologized. It appeared that you'd fired him—for getting drunk at his cousin's wedding and having a fight with a cop—and he was just clearing up before leaving."

Coomber moistened his lips again and muttered, "A drunken little jerk who'd been helping himself to the petty cash."

"Well, that's as may be," Fenton said. "To me it was an instant case of fellow feeling. I took him out for a drink—to that Italian place, Muratores. I wasn't prying—not at first. I was just sorry for the poor little guy and I had four hours to wait for a train back to Bombay. But three or four local rums on top of a solid foundation of beer opened the floodgates. He talked. Boy, how he talked! All about Miss Dolly Pereira and the little lovenest you'd taken for her—a lonely bungalow near the Kirkee station. Remember?"

"Go on," said Coomber dully.

"You had certainly settled in. It cast quite a new light on the one-time secretary of the dear old school's Christian Union—with a little wife back in England working her pretty fingers to the bone in a military hospital. I could hardly believe it at first, but he assured me that every word was true. He offered to show me the bungalow. He said he was fairly certain that was where you were at that very moment. I took him up on it, because I couldn't resist the opportunity of seeing your face when I walked in on you."

"We got a taxi outside Poona station and went down—but we were only half successful. She was there, but you were in Sholapur, she told us. And was she angry! Things had been coming up to the boil for some time, apparently. She had just found out that you were married, and it seemed that the poor gal had had ambitions of becoming Mrs. Coomber, Junior herself. She told us that she was thinking of writing to your father and your wife and spilling the beans, because she was convinced that this Sholapur move by you was the final brushoff. Yes, she sure spilled the lot to us."

"All right," Coomber spat at him. "So I had a mistress out in India. What's so odd about that? So have a hell of a lot of other men."

"Yes," said Fenton gently. "But most other guys pension them off when they've finished. They don't *bump* them off."

Coomber got up quickly, walked to the window, and stood with his back to Fenton. For a long time he didn't speak, then he said slowly, "You're mad."

"Maybe," said Fenton coolly. "But hear me out. We had a couple of drinks with the lady and listened to her tale of woe. It was certainly Fenton's day to be a Wailing Wall. We had to leave then because it was getting near my train time. We drove back to Poona because I didn't realize then that I could have caught it at Kirkee station, which was close by. I think the taxi driver was trying to jack the fare up actually. Anyhow—"

"Come to the point, Fenton," said Coomber harshly. "I know what you're getting at. She was murdered in December 1941—"

"On the night of the fourteenth, to be accurate."

"Exactly—and I was in Sholapur at the time."

"So you said at the inquest. But you were lying."

"Prove it."

"Then you'd better listen carefully," Fenton told him, "because it's a little complicated. The last train of the day, if you remember, was the Secundurabad Express, which stops at Sholapur, Poona, and Kirkee. That was the one I caught. Again, if you remember, the Ladies Welfare Committee in Bombay always used to arrange excursion trips for troops passing through during the war—usually to Poona because it wasn't far but was always much cooler. They had one that day, so I found myself in a compartment with four other fellows from the troopship.

"Well, ten minutes after leaving Poona we stopped at Kirkee. It was almost dark about this time, and I was half dozing. I was awakened by the other chaps laughing, and one of them yelled through the window, 'Hey! You can't do that. I'll report you to Gandhi—'"

"My God," breathed Coomber.

"Remember, do you?" Fenton said triumphantly. "Yes, it was you. You turned, startled, and I saw your face in the overhead light. You had just swung a suitcase over the railings and were squeezing through after it—as if to avoid having to give up a ticket at the barrier as the other passengers were doing. The action of a man who was either trying to dodge paying his fare—or one who didn't wish to be seen and recognized later. Yes, Coomber, that was the night of December fourteenth, 1941."

"And you waited twenty-eight years—" Coomber said in a voice scarcely above a whisper.

"Waited, hell," Fenton laughed dryly. "I didn't *know*. I remember telling the others that I knew you—in fact, I shoved my head out of the window and yelled—but you'd already hared off into the darkness. I told them that I'd come up to see you, and why, and what a louse I thought you were. And they agreed, and we discussed bosses we had known, and loathed, in civilian life until we got back in Bombay—and things were happening there that put the whole thing out of our minds for a hell of a long time to come. The military police were at Victoria Terminus hustling all troopship personnel back on board and we sailed at midnight, blacked-out and under radio silence, and a week later we were in Singapore—and ten days after that we were in the Jap bag. We had a lot of other things on our minds for the next three and a half years. Things like staying alive."

"Your word against mine," Coomber breathed, and Fenton laughed again and shook his head.

"Not quite," he said. "Of those four in that compartment, two, to my knowledge, have survived. One I met less than a month ago at a regimental reunion. He'd remember, all right. He's an architect now, in a big way—a good, sound, reliable witness, a prosecuting lawyer's dream."

"But why are you bringing it all up *now*?" Coomber insisted.

"I told you—I didn't know," Fenton said. "I also told you what my job is nowadays. Free-lance journalist. That's a beautiful euphemism actually. I collect dry-as-dust market figures from the past for a two-bit agency. It involves going through stock market figures over the years—delving through newspaper morgues and the British Museum—and the punks pay me for what they use, not what I collect. A month ago they asked me to get them world jute prices from right back to 1935. God, what a job. I'm not a very good researcher, not disciplined enough. If I see an interesting story in an old paper I'm apt to stay with it. I saw a *very* interesting one in the *Bombay Times* a couple of days ago—datelined the fifteenth of December, 1941. I certainly stayed with that one—right through to the inquest—where the verdict was 'murder by a person unknown.' The sultry and lovely Miss Pereira was found strangled in her bungalow. So there you have it. I came to see you."

Coomber returned to his desk, fumbled in a huge ormolu box, and took out a cigarette. He lit it with trembling hands and pushed the box toward Fenton, who shook his head.

"What do you want of me?" Coomber asked.

"Fifty thousand pounds," said Fenton levelly.

"That's blackmail," Coomber said accusingly, and Fenton roared his amusement.

"For a flat categorical statement of the obvious that takes today's star prize," he said. "You're damned right it's blackmail."

"And suppose you meet with a flat categorical invitation to go to hell?"

"Good question. I wondered that myself, so I went to see a pal of mine—a lawyer's chief clerk. I put it to him—as a hypothetical case, of course. He said one little anonymous note to the Bombay C.I.D. would put the whole thing in motion."

"Bosh!" said Coomber. He seemed now to be regaining his self-possession. "Twenty-eight years ago. We're out of India now, and the case will be closed."

Fenton shook his head. "Apparently not. A murder case is never

closed until solved—and we have an extradition treaty with them, remember. He, my pal, thinks it's just the sort of thing they'd rather like. You know, the elephant and the Indian Police never forget. A good prestige builder."

"Of course, fifty thousand pounds is completely out of the question," Coomber said.

"Too bad." Fenton looked genuinely sorrowful. "That's my price—take it or leave it."

"How long would you give me to raise it?"

"Twenty-four hours."

Coomber spread his hands hopelessly. "You quite obviously know nothing at all about finance," he said. "I'm a company—five companies to be precise. In my personal account at the moment I'd probably have a thousand, fifteen hundred. My wife might have roughly the same. If I needed money, big money out of the company funds, I'd have to give reasons, valid ones. They're not fools, you know."

Fenton yawned. "Your problem," he said.

"I'm just trying to explain things," Coomber went on. "To raise that amount I'd have to sell something."

"Then sell it," Fenton snapped.

"But that will take more than twenty-four hours."

"How much more?"

"Give me ninety-six."

Fenton shook his head. "Forty-eight," he said. "That's the limit. I'll be here this time the day after tomorrow. In two large suitcases—nothing over a fiver—and all old notes, if you don't mind."

"You seem to be an expert at this sort of thing," said Coomber dryly, and Fenton winked and clicked his tongue waggishly.

"Yes," he answered. "But I'll be honest with you. Never a touch as big as this before."

"How do I know you won't come back—again and again?"

"You don't," Fenton told him. "But to put your mind at rest I'll tell you something. The real professional never takes a lot of little bites. He takes one big one, and leaves it alone thereafter. Coming back again and again can have awkward repercussions. People can be driven to do silly things—they sometimes leave notes to coroners and the police." Fenton smiled genially. "Cheer up, you'll get over it. And now would you mind my using your telephone? I'll need a taxi to get back to the station."

"Tell Garcia to drive you down," Coomber said, and checked the other's ironic thanks with an upraised hand. "Frankly I'd rather have you off the premises than waiting around."

"You wound me." Fenton grinned. "Until Wednesday then."

At the door he turned and waved gaily, but Coomber was staring glumly at the blotting pad in front of him.

On Wednesday the butler admitted him again and showed him straight to the study without question—but it was not Coomber who rose to greet him from the other side of the big desk. This was a tall thin man smartly but not obtrusively dressed in summer tweeds.

Fenton, poker-faced but with warning bells ringing in his head, said, "Sorry, I thought I'd find Mr. Coomber here."

"Come in, come in," said the other affably. "Mr.—er—?"

"Fenton."

"Mr. Fenton. Friend of Mr. Coomber's, are you?"

"We were at school together," said Fenton cautiously.

"I see. So this is purely a social visit?"

"Hardly a visit. I just happened to be passing and I thought I'd take a glass of sherry with him."

The other man took a pipe from his side pocket and blew noisily down the stem before filling it from a worn pouch.

"And not a bad drop of sherry either," he said confidentially. "Imports it specially through Pentonberry and Sons in the City. Does himself well, does our George. Live down these parts, Mr. Findon?"

"Fenton." He felt his confidence returning. The other apologized expansively.

"I don't think I caught *your* name, by the way," Fenton went on pointedly.

"Sorry," said the other. "I talk too damn much, that's my trouble. Wartnaby. Harold Wartnaby." He put out his hand and Fenton shook it perfunctorily. "You say you *do* live down here?"

"I didn't," Fenton said. "I happen to have some business here, that's all." He glanced at his watch. "Well, if Mr. Coomber isn't about, I'd better get on my way." He moved toward the door. "You might tell him I dropped in, will you?"

"Oh, no need to dash off," said Wartnaby.

"I'm afraid I must be the best judge of that," said Fenton with a touch of asperity. "Good morning, Mr. Wartnaby."

"You wouldn't mind telling me what business it is that brings you down today—so hard on the heels of your last visit," Wartnaby said almost wheedlingly.

"I bloody well *would* mind!" exploded Fenton. "I said *good morning*." And he went to the door quickly—but not quite quickly enough, because Wartnaby, with a speed surprising for one so lankily built, reached the door first.

"Sorry," he said, still apologetically. "I'm afraid I didn't make matters quite clear." And he flashed a leather-bound card complete with photograph under Fenton's nose.

"Superintendent H. Wartnaby, City of London Police," Fenton read.

"Fraud Squad," Wartnaby added in explanation.

Fenton swallowed hard. "I can't see what you want with me," he said in a voice not quite his own.

"Not a thing," Wartnaby reassured him. "We only deal with companies—things like that. Very dull most of it. We've got to be lawyers and accountants mixed, and we get paid as coppers. No, actually I came down to arrest old Coomber. Shouldn't be telling you this, but the papers will be full of it before the evening."

"Arrest Coomber?" Fenton gawped at him. "What the hell for?"

"Can't tell you that, of course," Wartnaby said. "Sub judice. We didn't expect him to light out for the palms and sunshine for at least a week, but something seemed to have scared him—probably you—and he was off in that lovely big white boat of his yesterday—off like an Apollo rocket to the moon."

The Superintendent turned and looked out of the window as the sound of an approaching car came to them. "Ah, here's the local boys," he said with some relief. "You've got to watch it on a job like this. They don't like outsiders horning in, and my warrant only covers Coomber."

"Then you won't be wanting me," said Fenton, and started once more for the door.

"No, but *he* will," said Wartnaby as a large and rather bucolic man entered. "Inspector Blythe of the local force." He grinned and opened the big cigarette box on the desk. There was a slight scratching noise, then with awful clarity came a voice that Fenton instantly recognized as Coomber's.

"What do you want of me?"

"Fifty thousand pounds," he heard himself answering.

"That's blackmail," said Coomber's voice.

There was a shout of laughter followed by his own voice again: "For a flat categorical statement of the obvious—"

Wartnaby switched it off. "The whole lot's inside this thing," he said. "Bugged you, he did. Bugged you blind."

Some half-forgotten fragment of crooks' law came to Fenton, and he blustered, "You've got nothing on me. You can't convict on tape-recorded evidence alone."

"And he's right, you know, Inspector," said Wartnaby with the air of a father showing off a smart child.

"Yeah," said Inspector Blythe. "But you ought to hear what Mr. Coomber's been saying about him down at the station. He'll back the tape all right—it was Coomber first told us about it. Stinking angry he is, too."

"Wouldn't *you* be?" Wartnaby asked. "Million and a half in the bag, four busted companies behind you, everything set for a leisurely flit in your own time—then some jerk comes along with a false alarm and makes you jump the gun ahead of your schedule. Enough to make a saint spit."

"You said he'd gone," Fenton gasped.

"I said he'd pushed off in his lovely big white boat," Wartnaby corrected gently. "He did, but he ran out of fuel a few miles out, and the coast guard brought him back this morning. Seems like somebody had been monkeying about with his tanks. None of your boys been behaving illegally, I hope, Inspector?"

Inspector Blythe looked coy, then took Fenton by the arm. "Quite apart from Mr. Wartnaby's bit of business with Mr. Coomber, I'm arresting you on a charge of attempted blackmail," he said. "And it's my duty to warn you that anything you say will be taken down in writing and may be given in evidence at a time and place appropriate in the future."

"All right," said Fenton viciously. "I might get five years—if it sticks—but I still wouldn't swap mine for his. Hanging's still on the books in India."

"Oh, *that*?" Wartnaby smiled. "He was just stringing you along to stall for time, I'm afraid. He's in the clear. They got the fellow who did it. A former boy friend by the name of Braganza. You didn't read *far* enough in those papers, Mr. Fenton. Take him away, Inspector—and congratulations. Makes quite a change from chicken stealing, doesn't it?"

Inspector Blythe said something decidedly uncomplimentary under his breath.

Gerald Kersh

One Case in a Million

Poindexter, the famous hangman, inventor of the Poindexter Drop, was now at the end of his career. Eavesdrop on the old executioner talking to his protégé, the young man whom Poindexter had trained to carry on after him...

Poindexter, the old executioner, who taught me my trade, sent for me before he died. His mind was never far from his work, so we talked shop.

I sat by Poindexter's bed. "How are you feeling, Mr. Poindexter?" I asked, because he did not look at all well. "Anything you fancy? What do you say to a bit of brandy?" I drew a bottle from one of my pockets.

But old Poindexter shook his head, saying, "I promised my dear old mother I'd never drink spirits, and I'm not going to break that pledge now. Anyway, it always disagreed with me; and, you mark my words, drink leads to no good. You ought to know that yourself without me telling you.

"Why, a good four out of every ten clients wouldn't have come our way, Balsam, if it hadn't been for their drinking spirits. A glass of beer, as my dear old mother always used to say, never did anybody much harm... No, thanks, Balsam; not even a bottle of stout—it might upset my stomach. I'll drink an egg beaten up in warm milk, with a little sugar in it. You can have some brandy, if you like—though, mind you, I advise against it.

"I've always advised against it, 'specially before a job—any job, let alone a world-famous one, like you've got to do, Balsam, my boy."

I said, "I know, Mr. Poindexter. You've been like a father to me, always."

Old Poindexter said, "Well, as one might say, I always regarded you as sort of a son. I learned you your craft, didn't I? They may say what they like about me, but I'll go down in history as the First Scientific Executioner."

"You know that. The others—well, they just hanged a man; me, I *executed* him. Why, it must have been about the time of the Barton Place Murder when I perfected what they now call Poindexter's Drop. Remember? It was in 1897—"

"I was an apprentice then," I said, "and the Poindexter Drop was a little before my time, Mr. Poindexter; but I remember, all right. It was you who trained me—I ought to know, Mr. Poindexter, oughtn't I?"

He talked to me, half pleading yet with a certain severity—somewhat as an anxious teacher talks to a nervous pupil on the eve of some examination, as if fearing to be let down and therefore offering encouragement mixed with admonition.

Poindexter said, "You've got to understand this one case in a million. And I won't be able to see the operation through. That's what the newspapers call 'An Irony of Fate'... You're a lucky boy, young Balsam, a lucky boy!"

Then I said, "I hate the job, to tell you the truth. I had half a mind to report sick, and let somebody else do it."

Poindexter sat up, and his voice was urgent as he cried, "No! That would be slacking, and you must never do that! No malingering, Balsam, or I'll—"

Then plaintively he asked, "Who would take your place? Bill Vince? Bill Vince is a nervous boy. Twice he fumbled the straps. Once, when he was pulling the hood over the head of Littlecrown, who did the Sheffield Hatchet Murder, he scratched Littlecrown's lip with his thumbnail. Littlecrown let out a yell, and turned half sideways as I pulled the bolt.

"And that was the only job I ever bungled; and it was all Vince's fault... No, Balsam, if it's with my last breath that I say it: I look to you to keep my reputation clean."

"Mr. Poindexter, I promise I won't let you down," I said. "Only I wish you could be behind me!"

Poindexter said, "Enough of that, my boy. I felt pretty much as you do now when I executed Mrs. Nardwick for murdering her husband fifteen years ago. I had nerves then, upon my word! Between hanging a woman and hanging a man, there's a certain difference, you understand. I hope you never have to hang a woman!"

"Let's not go into details, son, but Mrs. Nardwick was on my mind for quite a little while after that. The fact is, you know, I've got a soft heart. I always think of my dear old mother, you understand... I never could bear to hurt a woman, Balsam!"

"It said in the Record '*Death Inst.*,' didn't it?" I said.

"Very likely," said Poindexter, "very likely. I always put Death down as *Inst.* Very likely it is *inst.* Instantaneous, *inst.* . . . I never could bring myself to hurt anybody, you know—that's why I worked out the Poindexter Drop, and tried to arrange matters so that everything would be over in a second—head covered, arms tied, legs tied, rope adjusted—simultaneous!—and, *click!*"

"The way I work it out, Mr. Poindexter, it can't hurt," I said.

"No, no," said Poindexter eagerly, "not half so much as a tooth-ache. As I conceive it, it must feel like a quick blow under the ear. You simply see stars, and then comes the dark. Later you wake up. Ah, but where? And it's *after* you wake up that the pain comes on, isn't it?"

"Ah, yes, but—"

"No, but wait a minute! I had a dream the other night—last night, to be exact—a dream of falling. I was going up and up and up a ladder—and all of a sudden I stepped on a rung that wasn't there and fell a thousand miles before I hit the bed I had never left. That was a bad 'un! And yet it only lasted half of a quarter of a second. Then *Death Inst.!* I ask myself, 'Is it, though?'"

"I swear, Mr. Poindexter—*inst.!*" I said.

The old hangman shook his head and said, "I ask you, what is *inst.?* You can live a whole lifetime in a second, in a dream. . . and what is a dream? *Inst.* However, my boy, all this is beside the point. I won't be at your shoulder to give you the office, so I must rely on you to take your own initiative, and not to let me down, young Balsam."

He became brisk. "Come on now, son, have you got your weights and measures right, first and foremost?"

"Height, five foot nine and a half inches," I said. "Weight, thirteen stone ten and a half pounds."

"Neck?"

"Seventeen inches, Mr. Poindexter, sir."

"Not very muscular, no."

"What drop will you allow?" asked old Poindexter.

I was not quite certain. I said, "I would have said six foot."

Poindexter cried, "Wait a minute! This client is a bit too heavy for the musculature of the neck—allow a five-foot drop."

"You're the boss, Mr. Poindexter."

Apropos of nothing, as it seemed, Poindexter said, "You know, that Mrs. Nardwick—I never could get her out of my mind."

I could only say, "She was sentenced to be hanged by the neck until she was dead, and the Lord have mercy upon her soul, for poisoning her husband with arsenic."

"Weed killer," said Poindexter, correcting me. "You know, she was a kind-hearted woman. Longsuffering, too. Another woman would have done it with a hammer or a chopper or a knife. Only she was sensitive. That was her downfall. You know what? You might say that Nardwick worried himself and his wife to death.

"It might happen to anyone with a kind heart, don't you think, Balsam? Take the case of my Clara. She was a soft-hearted woman, and I kept her believing I was a tobacconist, to spare her feelings, you know. But when she found out why I had to go away every so often, she pined away.

"Another woman would have left me. Not Clara—she stayed, and she suffered. So what could I do but put something in her cocoa, to put her out of her misery? I ask you now!"

I told him, "I must go, Mr. Poindexter. Are you sure you wouldn't like a bit of brandy?"

"No, thanks, my boy. Too old to learn new habits. See you at eight o'clock in the Yard. Keep a steady hand, remember, and synchronize, always synchronize... And oh, by the way, just to be on the safe side, better make that drop of mine five foot six," said Mr. Poindexter. "No point in tearing my skin, Balsam.

"Don't let me down now."



Simon Troy

The Liquidation File

Roger Railton was an organized man—methodical, precise, careful, with everything planned in advance to the smallest detail. So when he decided to murder his wife, he brought his talent for exact order into full operation . . .

We would like to pay Simon Troy a great compliment: while reading his story, "The Liquidation File," we were strongly reminded of the late Roy Vickers' crime short stories. Mr. Vickers added detection to his marvelous tales of the Department of Dead Ends, and we now urge Mr. Troy to try his hand at a series of contemporary "inverted detective" stories. Create a new Department, Mr. Troy, especially for EQMM . . .

Roger Railton was a methodical man. When he decided to murder his wife he opened a file and put Ag. (L) at the top right-hand corner.

All the details of his private and business life were highly organized. His wife's name was Agnes. The L stood for *Liquidation*, a euphemism which offended him less than the word beginning with *M*.

The first entry he made in that file was headed *B.S.* Somebody had to dance at the end of Railton's second string, and it might as well be someone he disliked, someone dangerous to him. Bernard Saunders was such a man.

Agnes had to die for several reasons, all of them adequate. She represented £100,000 he would never lay his hands on otherwise—the present value of her shares in the company, left to her by her father. She was the one factor in his life he had never been able to organize. Cool, aloof, reserved, she had all the mulish obstinacy so often found in those women who apparently wouldn't say boo to a goose. She was resilient. He could bend Agnes a long way, but she never broke. She always came back to right where she started from.

Also, she knew him, through and through—his cruelty, his rank dishonesty, his womanizing.

Agnes was fifteen years younger than Roger Railton. He had set about the business of marrying her just as methodically as he was now planning her exit from the scene. As the Managing Director's daughter, she was worth a little trouble on Roger's part.

Railton was Managing Director now, following his father-in-law's death. But he wasn't done with the family—oh, no! Agnes had what she called her obligations. She made a point of raising her voice at every Board meeting. She was a thorn, a dagger in Railton's side. So was Saunders. He'd come into the firm four years ago—a specialist in heat-resisting alloys, a brilliant metallurgist, a forceful chap who had ideas and could put them over. Railton's codirectors had been pressing a long time for Saunders to be appointed to the Board of Directors. So far, Railton had successfully resisted, but he knew the tide was running against him.

Yet Agnes, in spite of her interfering ways and the support she gave Saunders at Board meetings, might have survived if only she had been organizable. Roger Railton's day was precisely ordered from his rising to his going to bed. He always knew exactly where he would be at, say, 5:07 a week from next Wednesday. Whereas Agnes neither knew nor cared where she would be or what she would be doing a half hour from now.

Bernard Saunders, in spite of his knowledge and skill, was cast in a mold similar to Agnes'. He was deceptively lazy, easy-going, and good-humored. It irked Railton that Saunders' approach should be so nonchalant, and yet so productive. Not only did he get through an infernal lot of work, but he preserved his popularity at the factory as well.

So much for justification. Now, the means—

Bernard Saunders was coming into Roger's office now, a big pipe between his teeth. He nodded casually as he closed the door. He accorded Railton a measure of polite respect, but his whole manner indicated that he wasn't the man to grovel before the Managing Director of a smallish factory on the outskirts of a smallish town.

"About those struts," he said. "I've had a report from the stress boys and they're fifty percent plus. That'll do for me. Give me the okay and I'll get the job tooled up."

"Deadline is the fifteenth of next month," Railton said.

"You'll get 'em."

Railton glanced at a desk pad. "Your holidays start on the eighth. I suppose you've taken that into account?"

"I said you'll get the stuff and you will. If necessary, I'll postpone my three weeks to September."

"But you're here on the holiday list—"

"Scrub the list!"

"Surely you've already made arrangements? Plane reservations, hotels, and so on?"

"Me?" Saunders roared with laughter. "Not on your sweet nelly! Might go tramping in Dorset, might go to Istanbul. I'll work that out in the ticket office at Victoria when the time comes."

When Bernard Saunders had gone, Railton opened his file. *SAUNDERS, Bernard, 34, unmarried, no feminine attachments or interests. Service flat on The Parkway.*

He passed a big plump hand over his bald head and thought. Thought hard.

Roger was in no hurry. Such things should be approached calmly, objectively; carefully.

The next conversation he had with Saunders was at the Unionist Ball, held a little way out of town at Lord Vardy's place. Railton had no urgent political loyalties, but social life can't be entirely ignored in a satellite community 30 miles from London. He took Agnes, of course. One has to keep up pretenses.

A few of the boys were there, competitors who would grab Saunders if they had a chance. Railton towered above them at the bar—he was a big powerful man—and talked in a patronizing sort of way. Bernard Saunders was cheerful but steady after a few drinks. Rooke, the company's Secretary, was talking to Dwyer, the Export Manager. One of Railton's competitors was staring mournfully into his glass and shaking his head.

"Your wife's father would turn in his grave if he saw what you've done to the old place," he said.

"My wife's father was old-fashioned—he wasn't in touch."

"You mean he wasn't so bloody avaricious as you are. Special alloys—why, you've chivvied around for the sake of a few tinpot contracts and lost half the reputation he took a lifetime to build up. And you'd have lost the other half if Saunders hadn't put the brake on."

"It's a matter of organization," Railton said. He looked vaguely round the big overheated room. "Where's Agnes, I wonder?"

"Sitting it out behind the potted palms," Rooke suggested.

Bernard Saunders took another glass from a convenient tray.

"You can have too much damned organization," he said. "That's your chief trouble, Railton."

Railton's dislike welled up. Saunders' use of his surname was deliberate, a calculated slight.

"What's my chief trouble?" he asked.

"You could organize anything from a flea circus to a nuclear war, but there's never any elasticity about your plans. They don't bend. Where are you if anything goes haywire? The man who keeps the wind in his sails is the one who can change course at a moment's notice."

"Change course," Railton repeated slowly. "Oh, but that's where you're wrong! I can change course with the next. You see, Bernard boy, my mind's organized as well as my habits. Give me just fifteen seconds and I'll have scrapped one line of action and taken up another—and that goes for poker or running the show that pays your damned inflated salary."

Saunders clapped him on the shoulder. "I'm proud to work for you, Railton!"

None of this had been quite accidental. Railton knew exactly what he was doing.

He rescued his wife from the arms of a languid junior executive. Agnes had never been a vividly pretty girl, but she had charm, and she looked very young and attractive now as she smiled up at her husband. Mockery, of course, was behind the smile. Others might not notice it, but Railton did.

"You know my wife?" he said to Saunders, who was passing.

"We've met," Saunders said. "How d'you do, Mrs. Railton."

"I'm hot and tired," she said. "Does anyone have a cigarette?"

Railton gave her one, and lit it.

"It's late," he said, "but I want to see a man named Dean on some business. He's staying overnight at the Victoria Hotel. Shall you wait till I come back, Agnes? Or perhaps Saunders could drop you off on his way home. That would save me the trip back."

"Glad to," Saunders agreed. "Give me a nudge when you're ready to leave, Mrs. Railton. I'll be at the bar."

There was no man named Dean staying at the Victoria. Nor did Railton go there or even leave Lord Vardy's premises, though he

kept out of his wife's way, and Saunders'. He kept his eye on them till they both left about 12:45, then he made his way back to the bar for a nightcap.

After a carefully timed interval he touched Rooke's shoulder. "Have you seen my wife?" he asked.

"Lost her again?" Rooke inquired with alcoholic gravity. "Last time I saw her she was talking to you."

"That was an hour ago." Railton glanced irritably at his watch. "Damned odd."

He drifted away, spoke to two or three people, and returned to the bar with a carefully simulated expression of mild anxiety on his heavy face. He said once again that it was damned odd.

"What's odd?" Rooke asked.

"I can't find my wife. Where's Saunders? Has he gone home?"

"Saunders?" Rooke surveyed the crowd, thinner now than an hour ago. "Haven't seen him for quite a while."

Railton said in a sharper voice to Dwyer, "Have you seen my wife?"

"Had a dance with her around nine," Dwyer said. "Haven't seen her since then."

"I wonder if Saunders . . ."

"What's that about Saunders again?" Rooke asked.

"Nothing." Roger shook his head, well aware that both men were looking at him with mouths slightly open. "Seems queer, that's all."

He didn't say what seemed queer, which only added to their curiosity.

Roger drove home, feeling moderately well-pleased with himself.

Home was a large, fairly modern structure set among trees near the river, well away from the industrial smoke that the town produced. It was a house without servants, except for day help—a factor Roger had carefully considered.

He garaged his car and let himself in. Agnes was kneeling in front of the fire. There was no sign of Saunders.

"He had a drink and went home," she said indifferently.

A slight disappointment. Some mutual attraction between Agnes and Saunders would have helped, but perhaps that was too much to expect. Agnes was as frigid as a December morning and Bernard Saunders was obsessed with his work. Fortunately, the ultimate issue was out of their hands.

"I sometimes wonder why you bother to go to these affairs," he said. "If it's too much trouble to make yourself pleasant to my business associates—"

"I don't care for them."

"I don't care for them," he mimicked. "I wonder what you do care for?"

She looked at him over her shoulder, her brown hair shining in the firelight. "Kindness, and perhaps a little flattery sometimes. Quiet pleasant things that you consider a complete waste of time. But most of all, kindness."

He stared down at her. She was so much stronger than he was. He could snap every bone in her body, but he could never quench the mocking gleam in her eyes.

"You checked so many things before you married me," she told him. "Other things, maybe more important, you missed . . . You wanted money so badly, didn't you?"

"Most people do. And talking of money, *your* money, if you've changed your mind about the offer I made—"

"I haven't. You didn't do quite as you liked in my father's day. You won't in mine."

And by saying that; he thought grimly, you've put the seal on your own death warrant.

For some weeks Roger Railton had been painstakingly copying his wife's handwriting.

A few days after the Unionist dance he wrote an entirely imaginary letter from his wife to an entirely imaginary character, then promptly burned it. This was not such lunacy as it appeared to be. He wanted, not the letter, but its impression on the page underneath.

When Rooke came into the office the following afternoon, he found Railton standing near the window with a sheet of blank paper in one hand and a magnifying lens in the other. It was a posture and a preoccupation so emphatically out of character that Rooke stared in astonishment. Railton glanced up and hurriedly stuffed the paper into his pocket.

He came back to his desk, and Rooke opened a folder, drawing Roger's attention to the columns of figures. But for once—indeed, for the first time in Rooke's memory—Railton's mind did not appear to be on his work.

"Is anything wrong, Mr. Railton?" he asked.

"Wrong? What the hell should be wrong?"

"I thought you seemed a bit upset, that's all."

Railton was breathing hard. "Nothing, nothing."

He bent over the accounts that Rooke had brought in, then suddenly pushed them away and smacked his hand down on the desk. "I wonder how far you're to be trusted?" he said, well-knowing that the distance could be measured in millimeters. "What d'you make of this?"

Rooke gave him a keen glance, then peered again at the sheet. "Your sight's better than mine."

"What about the third line? Is that word *better*?"

"Could be."

"Follow that line on. And the next."

Rooke sat down and gave the sheet his full attention. "Where did you get this?" he asked, after several minutes of scrutiny.

"Never mind where I got it." Railton reached for the sheet and held one of the corners over his cigarette lighter. He dropped the curling ash into the wastebasket. "Best thing to do with it. Shouldn't have bothered you, but—"

He mopped his forehead. "Get me a glass of water, Rooke. And oblige me by forgetting about this, will you?"

Rooke brought the glass of water and went out. Railton's eyes followed his progress along the corridor. How long before Rooke told someone—in strictest confidence, of course? Not long. Give him a mere quarter of an hour.

Rooke, as the firm's Secretary, was perfectly well-acquainted with Agnes' signature. Though not, perhaps, with those scraps of frustrated sentiment expressed on that sheet and now burned beyond further reference.

Some circumstances intolerable . . . Better perhaps to die if one had the courage . . .

Railton smiled craftily to himself. The subtle touch! *Today has seemed like twenty days . . . If you mean all you say then for heaven's sake . . .*

Nothing extravagant, no purple prose. Agnes wasn't that kind.

He drank the water that Rooke had brought. Nothing like being thorough.

By Saturday he was conscious of Rooke's curious stare whenever he encountered the man. Rooke and Dwyer were members of the same golf club. There was a perceptible difference in

Dwyer's manner too. A slight—could it be concern, a man-to-man sympathy?

For a week Railton sat tight, carefully cultivating that preoccupied manner. It was late on Friday evening when he strolled along the corridor to the Export Department. The staff had left, and Dwyer was clearing his desk.

"When is Saunders putting that strut job into production?" Railton asked.

"It's jiggled up," Dwyer told him. "Only a matter of days to run the lot off."

Railton nodded. "Is Saunders anywhere about?"

"Maybe in the staff canteen. He's working late tonight."

Railton went to the door, then turned round. "By the way, was Saunders working late last Wednesday?"

"Wednesday?" Dwyer's eyes veered sharply. "Couldn't say off-hand."

"After—say, eight o'clock?"

"I'd gone home myself before then. Why all this about Saunders?"

"Eh? Oh, nothing, nothing. Don't mention it to him, will you? It was—well, just a notion, that's all."

Tongue in cheek, he left Dwyer to make what he could of it.

There was no light in Saunders' office. Railton slipped quietly inside. Saunders kept a little-used briefcase behind the filing cabinet. He found it, took the small risk, and carried it to his own office.

The gambit was over, and Railton was now ready for the middle game. One small touch, and he supplied it on Monday. Seeing Rooke's angular shadow on the ribbed-glass door, he picked up the phone and pretended to be talking into it when Rooke entered.

"No, no, no!" he was saying. "I want somebody discreet. Not some clodhopping retired bobby. Somebody—"

He looked across the desk at Rooke. "Damn it, man, can't you knock before you come in?"

"I did knock, Mr. Railton."

Later that afternoon Rooke and Dwyer left together as usual. They were in earnest conversation, and Railton could guess what they were talking about.

The one uncooperative factor was Bernard Saunders himself.

Several times since the dance at Lord Vardy's place, Railton had suggested that he should come round to the house for dinner,

but Saunders had offered excuses and made it quite plain that after working hours he was interested neither in Railton's home nor in Railton's wife.

But that was only a minor snag. Railton was now planning the endgame.

Agnes had gone to see a movie. He went to her bedroom and spent a cautious half hour among the fripperies he found in her wardrobe, the tallboy, and her dressing-table drawers. He worked to a meticulous plan, smiling sourly as he handled his wife's more intimate garments. He chose carefully, packing into her light-weight weekend bag only such things as she was not likely to miss within the next day or two—two dresses, a silk nightgown, stockings; he had made a list of everything she would be likely to take. He concealed the bag in his own room, and proceeded to the next item on his criminous agenda.

This was Bernard Saunders' briefcase. In it he placed a number of securities, quietly accumulated at various times within the past few months. Their theft would be possible to Saunders, for Railton had kept them in a locked drawer of his desk, and at the last moment he would break open that drawer, as Saunders could easily have done.

When the briefcase too was safely hidden, he poured a liberal helping of whiskey and made himself comfortable in front of the fire. He projected himself into tomorrow, thinking of it as a third-person story. Closing his eyes, he visualized it exactly the way it would happen. He heard the words, felt the emotions. And realized the deep satisfaction that he would experience when the whole plan was fully carried out.

Tomorrow afternoon he would go to London and take a room at a small hotel where he had often stayed before. Shortly before five o'clock he would ring the factory and ask for Saunders.

"You, Saunders? Yes, I know you're busy, but I've got Mellars here. He's talking about another modification on his duct system. I've told him we're all tied up and it's out of the question at the old contract price, but you know how he is. Could you come up and talk him out of it?"

Saunders would look at his watch, grunt a reply.

"I know, Saunders, it's a damn nuisance. Still, you could come up on the 8:10 and be home again by midnight. Yes, at Russell Court—I'll have Mellars in the bar, well-oiled if possible. Okay? Oh, and by the way, could you drop off at my home and ask my

wife for the large manila envelope I left on my desk? Some figures relevant to Mellars' complaint."

Another grunt from Saunders.

"It won't be far out of your way—drop off on your way to the station. Unless you're going to drive into London, of course. If anything turns up at this end and I can save you the trip I'll phone you at my home. I'll phone at 7:55 sharp—that'll still give you time to make the 8:10 if I can't manage without you."

Saunders would know what *sharp* meant—Railton's *sharp*. Not six minutes to eight, or four, but *five*.

Railton would then have a light snack, check out of his room, and make his leisurely way out of London. And within a couple of hours he would be a sorrowing widower.

For the final scenes he had aimed at absolute simplicity. Guns, poisons—all such comparatively tricky methods were out. Agnes was to be killed by her lover, Bernard Saunders, an unscrupulous rascal who had broken open his employer's desk and stuffed his briefcase with the securities he knew, through Agnes, would be there. He had induced Agnes to pack her most attractive night attire, ready for a quick getaway. Then, the two lovers would quarrel...

Perhaps Agnes would have last-minute qualms, and Saunders would lose his temper with her. Railton had to kill his wife in such a way that an intelligent Coroner would credit Saunders with her death. So, how does one kill in a lovers' quarrel?

One shakes the shoulders, makes a grab for the throat, and almost before one is aware of it the vital spark is quenched.

That was how it would be.

Then, hide behind the curtains. Wait for Saunders, innocently calling for that manila envelope and hoping that a phone call at 7:55 sharp will save him a trip to London. Saunders coming in, rushing to the body prostrate on the carpet, dropping on his knees beside it.

Then, enter the avenger. Agnes dead, Saunders bending over her. The poker snatched from the hearth... What temporarily demented husband would do less?

Strike at Saunders, again and again. Now draw the dead Agnes' nails down Saunders' face. Pull a button from Saunders' coat and place it between the woman's clenched fingers.

Nothing much else. Only the lightweight bag with its frothy fripperies to put in the hall, the loaded briefcase beside it, both

ready for the romantic flight that had ended before it began.

Then Railton, crazy with grief, dazed, bewildered, blundering into the police station. The desk sergeant staring. "Well, it's Mr. Railton! Good evening, sir."

Looking with bloodshot eyes at the sergeant. "It—it's my wife. Dead . . . I came back from London . . . unexpectedly. She was dead. Strangled. He was bending over her. *He still had his hands on . . .*"

"Steady, sir! Steady on, now!"

"I hit him with the poker. Who? You won't know him. Fellow named Saunders. Works at my factory. Must have been going on for weeks, months, behind my back . . ."

"Now, sir, if you'll begin at the beginning—"

"I hit him with the poker. But she's dead, she's dead . . ."

Railton poured another whiskey. Pretty good, considering that his wife and Saunders scarcely knew each other. What would happen? Justifiable homicide? A nominal sentence for manslaughter?

One couldn't quite organize *that*. But Roger Railton was sure that he would be eating his next Christmas dinner at home.

And everything went according to plan.

He left for London shortly after noon, and spent an agreeable afternoon waiting for zero hour. He took a single room at his usual hotel and ordered dinner. At 4:55 he phoned the factory.

He was put through to Saunders, who was curt, saying that he was in the main assembly shop and up to his eyes. Railton explained the position, and waited for the grunt. It came.

"Can't you deal with that fool Mellars yourself? It's a bit late in the day for him to be coming along with major modifications."

"That's what I want you to tell him," Railton said, and mentioned the manila envelope.

"Okay," Saunders said in a resigned voice. "Large manila envelope on your desk, and you'll ring at five to eight if I'm to cancel the trip."

Railton put down the phone and ordered a light snack. An hour later he was checking out. The room clerk looked down his nose. "Sudden change of plan, Mr. Railton?"

"Say a sudden premonition," Railton said. "A feeling that something's wrong."

"I know, sir. Like somebody walking over your grave."

Railton nodded and made his way to the hotel garage. He was driving up Finchley Road when the odd train of thought occurred to him . . .

It was going to happen!

And what, when you came to think of it, had Agnes done to finish up on the rug with a purple throat and staring eyes? Or Saunders, for that matter, to lie beside her with brains and blood oozing onto the rug? Was it because Roger needed or even wanted them dead, or was it because he was caught like a fly in the web of his own organizing abilities?

He could call it off any moment, of course. He braked violently as a car jumped the traffic light at Swiss Cottage; sweat oozed into his eyes. But he *couldn't* call it off—because in that case he was mad, a stark lunatic, and lunatics have to go right on to the end of the road just to prove they're sane.

He took a grip on himself. Over the North Circular, onto the motorway. Mad as a hatter. Sane as a—now, what were you as sane as? Couldn't remember. Didn't matter, anyway . . .

It was 7:40 when he parked his car at the edge of a convenient spinney and let himself silently into the house by the little-used side entrance.

There was a light in his wife's bedroom. He could hear her footsteps as he stood in the dark hall, listening intently. He would have to call her down, for the "liquidation" had to be staged in the living room. The poker and curtained hiding place made that imperative.

Upstairs a door slammed shut. He stepped into the small cloakroom under the stairs. Then his blood froze as he heard her voice.

"Bernard!" she called from the top of the stairs. "Bernard, I can't find my bag. A little weekend case . . ."

In the darkness Railton put out both hands to grasp at something, but there was nothing to grasp. Now he heard Saunders' voice from the living room.

"Damn the bag! Put what you need in something else. I'll buy you another bag. Let's get out of here before he comes back."

A silence, then his wife's voice again. "You're sure, Bernard? Sure it's the right thing for us to do?"

"What's *right*, what's *wrong*?" demanded Saunders. "You're coming with me now—before he kills what's left of you. Come on, let's get out of here."

The click of a light switch, the slam of another door. Railton's groping fingers grasped something at last. An empty coat hook. He gripped it, swung on it, suspended above the chasm of his future.

He'd never known, never even guessed.

Saunders, coming straight over the moment he knew the coast was clear. That hadn't been in Roger's carefully planned schedule.

Railton remembered the dance at Lord Vardy's place. What had he said to Saunders? *I can change course with the next . . . Give me just fifteen seconds . . .*

Fifteen seconds. Time to assimilate all the details of a new situation and devise a new means to cope with it.

"Eight, nine, ten—" he muttered to himself.

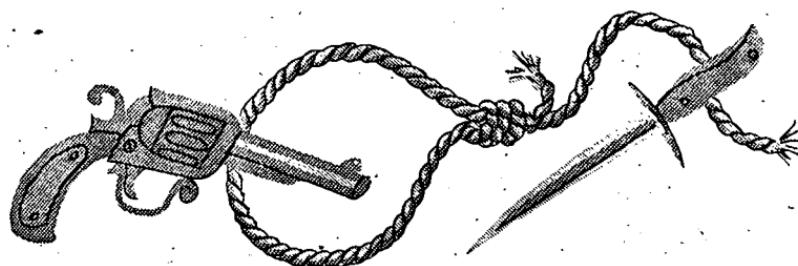
They were going through the front door. Saunders' car would be parked there. Railton swallowed the bitter pill—if he'd come that way instead of using the side door, he'd have seen it, he would have been able to think of something.

He blundered after them.

He was an organized man, wasn't he?

Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen . . .

But Saunders' car was already turning off into the quiet suburban road, and then it picked up speed.



Alan K. Young

Ponsonby and the Dying Words

Professor Amos Ponsonby of Briarwood College is now a series detective. In this case—a literary dying message—Professor Ponsonby draws on his academic background and wed (and ivory-towered) knowledge to rescue his godson, Public Defender Paul Anders, from "ignominious defeat." But Professor Ponsonby does not solve the case alone—he would be the first to admit it: he enlists the aid of a distinguished panel of well-known and famous American literary figures—including Bronson Alcott (the father of Louisa May Alcott), Edward Emerson (the son of Ralph Waldo Emerson), William Ellery Channing, and, last but most decidedly not least, Henry David Thoreau...

Detective: PROFESSOR AMOS PONSONBY

The County Attorney cast a final glance at his notes and then dropped them casually on the prosecution table.

In the back row of the crowded courtroom Professor Ponsonby shifted nervously. Here it comes, he thought—the testimony that was almost certain to send Samuel Greatheart to prison for murder. The two preceding witnesses had doubtless told much the same tale as Sergeant Means would now tell, but they had been amateurs. Here was the expert, the trained observer; here was the man who would take Samuel Greatheart's scalp for society.

From his seat on the aisle, Ponsonby could see the young defendant's profile—the broad Shoshone forehead, the stern Shoshone nose, the jet-black hair and the black eyes that never once during the trial had looked anywhere but into the eyes of his accusers, or those of the twelve men and women who soon would judge him. Beside him Public Defender Paul Anders slouched in his chair, defeat written in every sagging line.

Poor Paul, thought Ponsonby—saddled with an all-but-defenseless case in his first appearance as Public Defender. For

how could he hope to persuade the jury to close its ears to the murdered man's last words?

The County Attorney approached the balding, red-faced man on the witness stand. "Will you tell the court your name and title, please?"

"Detective Sergeant Alfred Means, Briarwood Police."

"And will you tell us, please, Sergeant, where you spent the evening of April fourth last, and what you were doing?"

"Yes, sir. I spent that evening at the bedside of the late Professor Nicholas Twining in Briarwood Hospital. I was there to get a statement from him in case he regained consciousness."

"And did Professor Twining regain consciousness while you were present?"

"Yes, sir, he did. For just a minute or two before he died."

"Now, Sergeant, the court has already heard the testimony of Nurse Mary Gebhorn and Hospital Orderly Horace Cayther as to what they heard Professor Twining say that evening in response to your question. I now intend to take you over the same ground, but first let me ask you this: during that evening or since, have you discussed Professor Twining's last words with Miss Gebhorn or Mr. Cayther, or been informed by them or by anyone else of what they thought they heard Twining say?"

"No, sir, I have not."

"So that any common ground between your testimony and theirs must stem entirely from your having shared the experience of being present at Professor Twining's deathbed?"

"Yes, sir."

The County Attorney cast a satisfied glance at the jury. "Now, Sergeant, please tell us exactly what occurred in that hospital room from the time Professor Twining regained consciousness until the moment he died."

"Well, as soon as we realized he was conscious—it was the orderly who first noticed his eyes were open—both the nurse and I started talking at once. That was my fault; I was excited—I'd been in that room off and on for three days without ever seeing the color of his eyes—and I started identifying myself while she was still asking him how he felt. But then we saw that he was trying to say something, so we both shut up and he said something like *one at a time*."

"'Something like' is rather vague, Sergeant. Could you be more specific?"

"No, sir, I don't think I can. Professor Twining sounded very groggy and was breathing real hard—he had to take a deep breath after almost every word—and sometimes he made a sound that might've been a word or it just might've been a rattle in his throat. But I think he said—very haltingly, you understand—one-at-a-time."

Ponsonby's thoughts returned to the testimony of the two previous witnesses. Nurse Gebhorn had been under the impression that there had been at least one other word in that mumbled phrase, but she hadn't been able to swear to it; Horace Cayther had missed the remark altogether, having stepped outside to send for the resident physician.

"What happened next?" the County Attorney asked.

Sergeant Means ran a chubby finger around the inside of his rapidly wilting collar. "Well, sir, at that point I said to the nurse, 'Let me go first, please, Miss,' and then I said to the deceased, 'Professor Twining, I'm Detective Sergeant Means of the Briarwood Police. Can you tell me who it was that hit you?'"

"And did Twining reply to that?"

"Yes, sir, although not very satisfactorily from my point of view. He said—still very groggy, you understand—I *did not*, and then a couple words that I just couldn't make out, and then the word *we*, and then he said what could have been another word or maybe a groan, or maybe he was just gasping for air. But then he said, real clear this time, the word *quarreled*. And then he took a deep breath—at least I think it was a breath—and he said the name *Ann*."

"In other words, Sergeant, he could very well have been trying to gasp out the statement, 'We quarreled over *Ann*'?"

"Your Honor, I object!" Paul Anders was instantly on his feet, his chubby face glowing with indignation.

But the judge needed no prompting. "Mr. Franks, you know better than that! Objection sustained. Clerk, strike that last question from the record. And the jury is hereby instructed to disregard any words other than those which the witness testifies to having heard the deceased speak, or to believing he heard the deceased speak."

The County Attorney bowed almost imperceptibly, as though fearful of cracking his paper-thin veneer of contrition.

"Blasted hypocrite!" muttered Ponsonby. The deliberate transgression, he knew, had been a telling point for the prosecution.

Nurse Gebhorn had testified that Professor Twining had mumbled *and* and then let his sentence die, and the orderly had been quite certain that the word had been either *and* or *aunt*. But since Professor Twining's only daughter was named Ann, the sergeant's testimony would undoubtedly strike the jury as representing the most likely interpretation.

And what was worse, all three witnesses had now testified to having heard those deadly words—*we* and *quarreled*.

"All right, Sergeant," the County Attorney continued, "let's take it from where the deceased uttered what you, a trained observer, understood to be the name *Ann*. What happened next?"

"Well, sir, then there was a long period of silence—so long that if Professor Twining's eyes hadn't been open and moving I'd have thought he'd passed out again. And I was getting nervous, so I said, hoping to sort of stimulate him, 'Was it Luther Cobb who hit you?'"

"And did he reply to that?"

"Yes, sir, he sure did. All this time he'd been lying there with a kind of dopey look on his face, but when I asked him if it was Luther Cobb that hit him he looked right at us, very deliberate like, and he said real clear: *That's a fallacy. That's not right.*"

"I see. He denied that it was Luther Cobb who'd struck him. What happened next?"

"He shut his eyes again, and I got to thinking what the Chief would say if I found out who didn't hit him instead of who did, so I asked again, 'Professor Twining, who was it that did this to you?' And that's when he said it."

The County Attorney stood quietly for several moments, letting the irresistible magnet of whetted curiosity rivet the jury's attention to his next question. Only when the tension in the room was almost palpable did he ask, "What did he say, Sergeant?"

"Well, sir, Professor Twining opened his eyes again, still looking right at me, and he said, *Actually, it was*— But then his voice sort of trailed off again, and he turned his eyes toward the ceiling, sort of puzzled like, as though he saw something up there that he couldn't quite make out, and then he said a word I didn't quite get, but I think it was *noose*—"

A wave of laughter swept the courtroom, momentarily easing the tension. Ponsonby chuckled with the others as he recalled the testimony of the previous witnesses: young Horace Cayther, who was known to all Briarwood as an ardent hunter, had been cer-

tain the dying man had mumbled the word *moose*, while Nurse Gebhorn had distinctly heard it as *juice*.

The judge gavelled for silence. The laughter died, the tension snapped back into place.

"And then?" prompted the County Attorney.

Sergeant Means took a deep breath, as though he were exhausted by the weight of what he was about to speak. "Then Professor Twining looked right at me again, and he said, clear as a bell, *Indian*. Then he just closed his eyes and stopped breathing."

The County Attorney turned slowly to face the jury; he remained facing them as he framed his final question. "Let me make quite certain that we all understood you correctly, Sergeant. When you asked Professor Twining, 'Who was it that did this to you?' he replied, *Actually, it was*— and then a word you aren't entirely sure of but which could have been *noose*, and then, clear as a bell, the word *Indian*. And having said that, he died. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you, Sergeant. Your witness, Mr. Anders."

So there it was, thought Ponsonby: that inescapable, seemingly unchallengeable word *Indian*, testified to now by three solid, reliable witnesses. Of course Nurse Gebhorn thought the dying man had said *Indians*, making it plural, and perhaps the defense could do something with that.

But do what? he asked himself sarcastically—suggest to the jury that the entire Shoshone nation had attacked Nicholas Twining? No, if there were any way Paul could save his client, it lay in finding some logical explanation for Nicholas Twining's last, devastatingly incriminating word. Which was exactly what Ponsonby had been trying to do ever since Paul first told him of the deathbed accusation against Samuel Greatheart, and so far Ponsonby hadn't come close to finding such an explanation.

Or had he? As he watched the Public Defender rise to begin his gallant but futile cross-examination, Ponsonby let his thoughts drift back to the morning several months before when Paul had first shown him the transcript of Sergeant Means' preliminary testimony. Hadn't there been a moment that morning when he'd sensed that there was an explanation lurking just over the horizon of his memory if only he could reach out and pull it in?

It had, he remembered, been a lovely April morning in his sunlit study on Spring Street...

Ponsonby had laid down his pen, leaned back in his chair, and peered at his housekeeper over his spectacles. "Mrs. Garvey?"

Mrs. Garvey had sighed and straightened up from her task of watering the potted ferns in the broad bay window. She had known what was coming—the Professor frequently used her as a sounding board for his latest "scribblings," as she thought of them, even though they often dealt with subjects whose very existence was a profound revelation to her. "Yes, love?" she asked resignedly.

"Tell me how this sounds to you—it's a commemorative passage on Professor Twining which I've been asked to prepare for the Faculty Minutes."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Garvey, brightening. Here was something more to her liking—a real-life murder that had bestirred their quiet college community as no other event in thirty years, a topic far more satisfying than those bloodless, bodiless scandals—"the unwarranted prostitution of our mother tongue"—that the Professor was always going on about in letters to the Briarwood newspaper.

Adjusting his spectacles more firmly on his nose, Ponsonby returned his attention to the passage.

"Nicholas Albert Twining," he read aloud, "Roylston Professor of English at Briarwood College, died April fourth in his fifty-first year. For twenty-two years Professor Twining was an inspired and inspiring teacher, a productive scholar and a warm and generous friend to an ever-widening circle of students and colleagues. An expert in Nineteenth Century American literature, particularly the Transcendentalists, he so leavened wisdom with wit as to make himself loved as well as respected by all who took his courses. His scholarly legacy includes four books, at least one of which, *Sunlight on Walden Pond*, deservedly earned him national acclaim. At the time of his death he was working on a *Life of Thoreau* to which he had devoted four years of energy, and enthusiasm beyond measure.

"Although loathe at any time to part with this blithe and ebullient spirit, we yet may find comfort in the fact that he has left us at a time of year when a reawakening world can remind us, in the words of that Concord rebel whom Nicholas Twining knew so well and admired so much, that *our human life but dies down to its root, and still puts forth its green blade to eternity.*"

Professor Ponsonby lowered the paper and peered expectantly at his housekeeper.

"Oh, that is nice," said Mrs. Garvey enthusiastically. "That's just lovely. And I do so like that part about the blades in eternity. But I wonder now"—she paused, frowning—"shouldn't you say a little something about the black-hearted devil what struck him down?"

"Good heavens, woman!" huffed Ponsonby. "This is a commemorative minute, not a news story of Twining's murder!"

"Maybe so, love, but I don't see why that scoundrel Luther Cobb shouldn't be given his comeuppance in commemorable minutes same as anyplace else."

Ponsonby had started to reply, thought better of it, and subsided into an indignant silence, struck dumb once again by Mrs. Garvey's matter-of-fact approach to life. He was not surprised that his housekeeper should be seizing every opportunity to voice a self-satisfied "I-told-you-so"; she had often predicted a bad end for Luther Cobb, the drunkard, bully, and tavern brawler who had long been Briarwood's leading ne'er-do-well. What was unsettling was that she should be so obviously pleased that the poor brute had proved at last to be a murderer as well. Or presumably so, since he had not yet been formally charged with the crime.

At the time Ponsonby had known only what all Briarwood knew about the murder of his former colleague. Professor Twining had been struck down in the library of his home on College Avenue shortly after eight o'clock on the previous Thursday evening. His assailant had used a cast-iron bookend as a weapon, then wiped it clean of fingerprints, and tossed it down beside the body before fleeing out the back door.

Professor Twining's 19-year-old daughter Ann, who kept house for her widower father, had been upstairs at the time, displaying the fruits of a recent shopping spree to a friend. Hearing the commotion downstairs, the friend had happened to glance out a window just in time to see the assailant plunge off the back porch and disappear into the shrubbery, but all she had been certain of in the dusk was that he was a big man—a description which fitted six-foot-four, two-hundred-odd-pound Luther Cobb to a T.

The girls had rushed downstairs to find Professor Twining unconscious from a blow on the head, and so he had remained after surgery, until Sunday evening when he had died. But on Monday morning the rumor had raced like wildfire through Briarwood that he had regained consciousness at the last, long enough to identify his killer.

And had he named Luther Cobb, Ponsonby wondered? To one who was a faithful subscriber to both the Briarwood newspaper and Mrs. Garvey's grapevine, it seemed almost certain that he had. Not only had Cobb been seen in the Twining neighborhood on the night of the attack, but when picked up for questioning the next day he had been found to have \$300 in his pocket—the precise sum which Professor Twining had withdrawn from his bank the previous morning.

At first Cobb had claimed he'd won the money in a crap game, but later, when confronted with the fact that his fingerprints had been found in the Twining library, he reluctantly admitted his presence there on the evening of the crime, insisting, however, that Professor Twining had hired him to repair his garage roof and given him a cash advance to buy the needed materials. Insisting, too, that he had left Twining alive and well.

"Garage roof, my Aunt Minnie!" said Mrs. Garvey suddenly, as though she had been reading Ponsonby's thoughts. She had abandoned the watering can in favor of a feather duster which she now waved indignantly at her employer. "Nobody in his right mind would hire that rumpot to fix anything, let alone give him three hundred dollars."

"It's quite possible," observed Ponsonby, "that Professor Twining was unaware of Luther Cobb's reputation. Nicholas lived in a rarefied academic atmosphere, and had little contact with such mundane phenomena as small-town gossip." Ponsonby smiled, remembering his eccentric friend. "Yes, Nicholas definitely stepped to the music of a different drummer."

"Ah, so he was a veteran, too, poor man." Mrs. Garvey had returned to her housewifely attack and was busily flicking the dust from a bust of Alexander Pope. "I wonder if maybe you shouldn't have mentioned that in your commemorable minute? I know my Billy, God rest his soul, was as proud as Punch of his part in the war."

Ponsonby glared at his housekeeper's back. "My dear woman, I was merely alluding to an oft-quoted passage from Thoreau's *Walden*. I was not implying that Professor Twining had served in the war."

"No? Was he 4-F, then? Well, I guess you wouldn't want to mention that."

Ponsonby's already ruddy complexion turned a shade redder. "I haven't the slightest notion, Madam, whether or not Professor

Twining ever served in the armed forces, nor do I think, in so far as my faculty minute is concerned, that it matters at all."

"Of course it doesn't, love, and don't you fret about it. We're all the same at the gate of Heaven, soldier and civilian alike."

"Confound it, woman!" sputtered Ponsonby. "I didn't—I was only—it doesn't—" Only the timely peal of the doorbell saved Mrs. Garvey from one of the spirited denunciations to which the Professor occasionally subjected her, and which she good-naturedly assigned to a "sour stomach."

The man whom Mrs. Garvey ushered into the study a few moments later was in his late twenties, short and stocky, with dark curly hair and a round, almost adolescent face that to Ponsonby seemed strangely denuded without its usual grin.

"Here's Mr. Anders come to have morning coffee with us," said Mrs. Garvey. "Isn't that nice, now?"

Ponsonby regarded his godson with concern. "Well, Paul," he said when the young man had dropped into a chair by the hearth and Mrs. Garvey had hustled off to the kitchen, "to judge by appearances you do propose to write an ode to dejection."

"I beg your pardon, Uncle Amos?"

"Nothing, my boy. I've just been writing a brief memorial to Professor Twining, and Henry David Thoreau is on my mind."

"Thoreau? I thought that was Coleridge."

"The *Ode*, yes, but I was thinking of Thoreau's one-sentence preamble to *Walden*. It goes: *I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up.* I don't believe America has produced another writer who can match Thoreau's ability to compose sentences that stick in the mind."

"Like *The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation?*"

"My personal favorite has always been *Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes.*" Ponsonby smiled; it was good to see his godson grinning again. "But tell me, Paul, why is Briarwood's newly appointed Public Defender looking so glum this morning?"

"Because he's about to go down to ignominious defeat in his first appearance as Public Defender, that's why."

"Oh? And who might the public be in this case?"

"Do you know Samuel Greatheart?"

"Ann Twining's fiancé? I've met him once or twice. And of course I've seen him play—a fine fullback. But what trouble can he possibly be in?"

"He was arrested this morning for the murder of Professor Twining."

Ponsonby stared at his godson. "Samuel Greatheart? But I thought Luther Cobb—?"

"So did the police, until a minute or so before Professor Twining died, when he regained consciousness long enough to identify his murderer."

"Do you mean he actually identified Samuel Greatheart?"

"Not by name, but he came close enough to satisfy the County Attorney." Paul pulled a paper from his inside coat pocket. "Here's a copy of the preliminary deposition made by the detective who was present when Professor Twining died. And I'm told there are two witnesses who can corroborate this, give or take a word here or there."

Ponsonby had taken the deposition and read it through, frowning over the same incriminating words he was to hear uttered aloud three months later in the County Courthouse ("very haltingly," the detective had explained): *One - at - a - time . . . I-did-not. . . we. . . quarreled. . . Ann. That's-a-fallacy; that's-not-right. . . Actually, it was. . . noose. . . Indian.*

At last he lowered the paper to his lap. "But Nicholas certainly knew the young man's name. If it was Samuel Greatheart whom he meant, why didn't he come right out and say so?"

"I'm not sure, but I'll bet that the County Attorney is going to introduce medical testimony to the effect that a man who's had a bad concussion can sometimes remember most of what happened to him and still forget the commonest details—even his own name sometimes."

"But surely Samuel isn't the only Indian in Briarwood?"

"There are seventeen American Indians and two Indians from India. But even though Ann Twining refuses to believe Sam's guilty, she admits he's the only one of them her father had any contact with—the only Indian he ever even knew, she thinks. So when the police heard that, they started checking and everything just seemed to fall into place."

"What do you mean by 'everything'?"

"Well, motive for one. Sam and Ann wanted to get married and they admit Professor Twining was dead-set against it. Apparently he didn't want his daughter marrying an Indian, especially one who has nothing in the world but a football scholarship and the shirt on his back."

"Poppycock! In some ways Nicholas Twining was a very old-fashioned man and he may have thought Ann too young to marry, but he was no bigot. I'll stake my life that Samuel Greatheart's being an Indian had nothing to do with Nicholas' opposition to the match."

"Maybe not, Uncle Amos, but Sam himself admits to having had a couple of blazing rows with him about it, and anyone who's seen him play football knows he's got an unholy temper. I also understand the County Attorney can produce a witness who'll testify to having heard Professor Twining refer to Sam as 'that damned Indian,' so apparently there was no love lost on his side, either."

"Nonsense! When we're vexed with someone we all choose the readiest handle for our whip. In my mind I refer to Mrs. Garvey as 'that damned woman' twenty times a week, but I certainly don't intend it as a serious indictment of either her or her sex."

Paul grinned. "I didn't think you two ever quarreled."

"Oh, we have our—" Ponsonby stiffened. "What was that?"

"I said I thought everything was always sweetness and light between you two." Paul regarded his godfather quizzically. "Why? Did I say something wrong?"

"No. No, it's just that for a moment there—" Ponsonby hesitated, frowning uncertainly; then he dismissed the interruption with a wave of his hand. "But tell me, what else do they have against Samuel Greatheart?"

"Well, there's opportunity. Sam says he was in his room from seven o'clock on that evening studying for a physics exam, but even though there are one hundred and fifty other boys in that dorm and Sam knows most of them, he can't produce a single witness to his being there. On top of which he failed that exam the next day, even though physics is a subject he generally does well in. Of course he blames it on his being upset over his row with Professor Twining."

"As understandably he would be."

"Yes, but wouldn't it be even more understandable if he'd almost killed a man the night before?"

Ponsonby regarded his godson speculatively. "Tell me, Paul, you sound as though you think he's guilty. Do you?"

Paul Anders leaned forward in his chair, propping his elbows on his knees. "I don't know what to think, Uncle Amos. I want to believe him, and when I talked with him this morning he sounded

so darned sincere I couldn't help but believe him. But then I walked out of that cell and came right up against a deathbed confession. Some detective says, 'Who did it?' and Professor Twining says *Indian*, and it's the last thing he ever does say. How can I explain that to a jury even if I do believe Sam myself? What sort of defense can I possibly hope to offer?"

"Well, I would certainly look into the whereabouts of those other nineteen Indians. And I would certainly throw Luther Cobb at the jury as a far more likely candidate for murder. And when you consider all the evidence against Cobb—a man with a history of violence, whose fingerprints were found at the scene of the crime, who turned up the next day with the victim's money in his pocket, then lied about how he'd come by it."

Paul shook his head disconsolately. "That's all just circumstantial evidence, Uncle Amos. It couldn't stand up against a deathbed identification."

Ponsonby snorted. "Some circumstantial evidence is very strong, as when you find a trout in the milk."

Paul grinned. "Say, that's good. Do you mind if I use it sometime?"

"If you do, be sure to credit our friend Thoreau. That's another of his gems—from his *Journal*, I believe."

Ponsonby realized with a start that the courtroom crowd was stirring, stretching, getting to its feet. "What's happening?" he asked of no one in particular.

"Recess until ten o'clock tomorrow," said a man beside him.

Ponsonby glanced at the front of the room. The judge and jury had gone and Paul was seated again at the defense table in a brow-to-brow huddle with his client. "Damn it all!" he thought. "I've been woolgathering all through the lad's cross-examination."

"Well, you didn't miss much," his godson assured him an hour later on Ponsonby's front porch, cool drinks in hand and the aroma of Mrs. Garvey's dinner preparations wafting faintly through the screen door.

"Then you couldn't shake the sergeant's testimony?"

"No more than I was able to shake the nurse and the orderly. Oh, I got the sergeant to repeat how halting Professor Twining's delivery was that night, and how hard it was to tell whether he was mumbling words or just gasping for breath. And I managed to emphasize what the sergeant kept calling his 'dopey

look'—you know, as though the Professor's mind had really been somewhere else.

"But that won't be enough to save Sam. All the County Attorney has to do is point out to the jury what a monstrous coincidence it would be, if Professor Twining was really just mumbling delirious nonsense, that out of the half million words in the English language he just happened to hit on *Indian* as the last one he ever spoke. And if he wasn't just mumbling deliriously, what was he more likely trying to say than 'it was that Indian who hit me and someone ought to make a noose and string him up'—or something like that."

"Nonsense! Nicholas would never have been that bloodthirsty. And as for coincidence, if Samuel Greatheart is innocent, then there has to be a coincidence of some sort involved. There virtually always is in a miscarriage of justice—look at those poor devils who've gone to prison because they just happened to look like someone else and been unable to account for their whereabouts when that someone else was committing a crime. What are the odds against that occurring? And yet it has, and all too often.

"But I don't think the coincidence here lies in that last word, Paul; doubtless Nicholas had some reason for saying it, even if we never know what it was. No, I think the coincidence here is that out of sixteen hundred Briarwood students, it just happened to be one of our nineteen Indians who was courting Ann Twining. If Samuel Greatheart were an Oriental or a Caucasian he wouldn't even be on trial, but he happens to be a Shoshone, and so he is about to be condemned by one unfortunate word."

"But a last word, Uncle Amos. Maybe you don't realize the weight a dying man's words carry with a jury, but it's far beyond their normal significance, believe me. It's about as though a jury considers a dying man to be half an angel already, and more or less speaking from two worlds at once."

"Oh, I recognize the fascination that deathbed utterances hold for the liv—" Ponsonby froze. Suddenly he shouted, "Not two worlds!"

Paul almost dropped his drink. "What the devil—?"

"Not 'two worlds,' Paul, but 'one world'! That's what Nicholas was trying to say! It has to be, don't you see? Because the rest of it—I *did not* and *we* and *quarreled*—they all fit so perfectly! My God, what a ninny I've been! Going around for months with that young man's salvation staring me in the face and if it hadn't been

for your chance remark just now I might have overlooked it altogether!"

Both men were on their feet, Ponsonby heading for the door, Paul close on his heels.

"Uncle Amos, what the devil are you talking about?"

"The fact that Nicholas Twining wasn't replying to those people at his bedside, my boy." Ponsonby spoke over his shoulder as he led the way into his study. "His thoughts were a century away, dwelling on a man whom he had loved all his life and virtually lived with for the last four years of it. Have you ever written a book, Paul, one that demands exhaustive research? Do you have any idea how completely such a task can consume your every waking thought when you're deeply involved in it? And, ninny that I am, Ann Twining even mentioned to me one time that her father had just started work on the final chapter of his *Life of Thoreau* the day he was attacked. And that's the chapter, don't you see, that most likely was to tell of Thoreau's death?"

"Thoreau? Then you mean—?"

"I mean that Nicholas Twining was thinking about Henry David Thoreau! And what more natural than that a man who probably sensed he was dying should let his last thoughts drift back to the dying words of a man whom he had admired in life above all others?"

Ponsonby selected a thick volume from one of his crowded shelves and began hastily thumbing through it. "This is more a popular than a scholarly biography, but all the more reason they should be here. That's what's so blasted annoying—I know I've read them a hundred times, my boy; they're both well-known literary anecdotes, two deathbed sallies as memorable in their way as anything Thoreau ever wrote, and—yes, here's one of them." And Ponsonby read aloud:

"Shortly before the end, the fiery anti-slavery orator, Parker Pillsbury, visited the sick room and remarked to his dying friend, 'You seem so near the brink of the dark river, that I almost wonder how the opposite shore may appear to you.' But Thoreau's characteristic sense of humor had not deserted him, and he replied dryly: 'One world at a time.'

"Don't you remember Paul? Nurse Gebhorn thought that Nicholas had mumbled some other word in that sentence and not just been gasping for breath. And of course she was right; he was trying to say, *One world at a time*.

"But I don't see what that has to do with a—a hanging Indian!"

"And the other anecdote ought to be here, too," continued Ponsonby. "Yes, here it is." And again he read aloud:

"As death drew near, his pious Aunt Louisa, a devout Calvinist, asked him if he had made his peace with God. Thoreau's reply stands as a fitting epitaph for this questing, rebellious man who had lived all his forty-four years in 'the infinite expectation of the dawn.' Said he: 'I did not know we had ever quarreled, Aunt.'"

Ponsonby closed the book with a snap and beamed triumphantly at his godson. "Don't you see? It wasn't *Ann* that Nicholas was mumbling, as the sergeant testified, nor was it *and*, as Nurse Gebhorn thought. It was *Aunt*—*I did not know we had ever quarreled, Aunt*—and the orderly was right all along."

Paul spoke quietly, spacing his words deliberately, as though he were a teacher trying to get through to a retarded child: "But what does all that have to do with a noose and an Indian?"

"Why, it ought to be obvious, my boy. Don't you recall Nicholas' next remark? It was, *That's a fallacy; that's not right*. In other words, those two remarks, although both have been presented as Thoreau's dying words, are not his last words. Which words—"

"Had something to do with a noose and an Indian?"

"Perhaps."

"That would be great, Uncle Amos! Go on!"

"Go on?"

"Yes. Read me the part about the hanging Indian, for Pete's sake!"

Ponsonby calmly returned the book to its place on the shelf. "There's nothing here about that, my boy—what I read was the closing paragraph of this particular biography. As a matter of fact, I don't recall ever having read a remark about hanging an Indian."

Paul Anders stared at his godfather. "Do you mean to say you don't actually know that Thoreau's last words were something about a noose and an Indian? That you've led me on like this, building up my hopes, without really remembering anything of the sort?"

"The fact that I don't recall having read it certainly doesn't mean it isn't so, my boy. American literature has never been my specialty. Now I can tell you that William Cowper died asking, 'What does it signify?' and that Robert Burns passed away muttering, 'That damned rascal, Matthew Penn!' and that the last

words spoken by Lord Chesterfield were 'Give Dayrolles a chair,' because I happen to have done extensive biographical research on those gentlemen. But I'm familiar with only the broad facts of Thoreau's life."

"But great Scott, Uncle Amos, I can't go before that jury and argue that Professor Twining was obviously thinking about Thoreau's last words, and since they weren't this and they weren't that, they must have been something about hanging an Indian. I'd be laughed out of court!"

"Tut, tut, my boy, don't carry on so. You ought to know by now that the true measure of an education is not what you can remember, but how adept you are at finding things out. And since Nicholas Twining had obviously learned from some source what Thoreau's last words actually were, I suggest we start our search in his library. Mrs. Garvey!"

Ponsonby turned to his housekeeper just as she appeared in the doorway to announce dinner. "Put the dinner back in the oven, my good woman, and then phone Ann Twining to say that Paul and I are on our way over. Tell her we're on the trail of information which may clear her fiancé"—Ponsonby noted the gathering storm on Mrs. Garvey's brow—"and almost certainly lead to the ultimate incarceration of that scoundrel, Luther Cobb!"

"It's no use, Uncle Amos," said Paul two hours later. "We've been through these books three times, and there's nothing in any of them about Thoreau's wanting to hang an Indian—or not wanting to hang one, which would seem more likely from some of the things we've read."

Paul and Ann were sitting cross-legged on the floor of the Twining library, surrounded by books on Thoreau, while Ponsonby perched atop his late colleague's shelf-ladder, scanning the upper shelves for any book they might have overlooked.

Their search had uncovered many facts about Thoreau's last year of life. They had learned that ten months before his death he had traveled to Minnesota and there for the first time had visited a frontier Indian village; they discovered that in his final weeks he had been working steadily on the manuscript-account of several earlier journeys to the Maine woods, where Indian guides had been among his close companions; they learned that in his last days, in spite of an illness which all knew must soon prove fatal, he had visited many friends and spoken often about his admira-

tion for the Indian people and his indignation at the way the nation had treated them.

They had found the origin of the *One world at a time* anecdote in the voluminous *Journals* of Bronson Alcott, and had come upon the source of the *I didn't know we'd quarreled* in a slim volume by Edward Emerson, entitled *Henry Thoreau as Remembered by a Young Friend*.

But they had found no reference to a *noose* and an *Indian*.

"It's no use," repeated Paul disconsolately. "We've been hunting for something that just doesn't exist."

"Nonsense! Consider what we've already established about those other two deathbed quotations. Now Bronson Alcott—that would be Louisa May Alcott's father—and Edward Emerson—Ralph Waldo Emerson's son—were both personal friends of Thoreau's, so there's little doubt that Thoreau did make the remarks they attributed to him. But you will notice that neither account purports to be setting down Thoreau's last words, nor even to be reporting an incident from the day of his death."

"Which doesn't prove anything about what his last words really were."

"Perhaps not, but—" Ponsonby paused, frowning. "Ann, are you quite certain that we've checked all your father's books on Thoreau? What about the source materials he was actually working with the day he was attacked? Were there no books on his desk or perhaps scattered about this room?"

"There might have been," said Ann, whose mounting disappointment during the search had been even more evident than Paul's. "I remember putting some things in a cardboard box and pushing it—yes, there it is."

Scrambling to her feet, Ann crossed the room and pulled a carton from under her father's desk. She placed it on the desk, opened it, and lifted out a small pile of books and papers.

The top item was a slim brown volume; Ann glanced at the cover. "*Thoreau, the Poet-Naturalist*," she read aloud, "by William Ellery Channing." She handed it to Ponsonby atop his ladder perch. "Who was he?"

"A close friend of Thoreau's. A fellow poet and fellow maverick who might well have asked Thoreau's mother or sister to describe his good friend's final—ahh!"

Ponsonby's half sigh, half exclamation acted like a magnet on the attention of his companions, but not until he had spent sev-

eral long tense minutes in silent reading did he finally end their suspense.

"Here we are, children," he said at last. "Your father had even marked the place, Ann—the book fell open to it in my hand. It's Channing's report of Thoreau's last few moments of life, and the lines we've been searching for are these:

"The last sentence he incompletely spoke contained but two distinct words: *moose* and *Indians*, showing how fixed in his mind was that relation. Then the world he had so long sung and delighted in faded tranquilly away from his eyes and hearing, till on that beautiful spring morning of May 6th, 1862, it closed on him."

Long after he had finished reading, the echo of Ponsonby's voice seemed to linger in the air of the hushed library. At last Paul broke the silence.

"Moose," he said softly.

"Indians," whispered Ann.

Gently, Ponsonby closed the book.



Holly Roth

The Girl Who Saw Too Much

Readers familiar with the work of Holly Roth know that she was a fine writer who could, simultaneously, be almost coldly objective and highly charged with emotion—no small achievement either in style or in subject matter. In "The Girl Who Saw Too Much" Holly Roth gave us a short novel about a young and beautiful widow who was eyewitness to a murder, about two detectives of entirely different natures, about a handsome reporter, and about a killer who looked like "the average man." This is the story of a normal life in which at one moment life is routine, even dull, and at another moment, only three minutes later, life has become melodrama. This is the damsel-in-distress story written as damsel-in-distress stories should be written.

An exciting short novel complete in this anthology...

Although the police station was a dank and cheerless contrast to the pleasant sunny street, Dell had been, at first, relieved to arrive there; just as she had been relieved when the policeman had finally shouldered his way through the mob at the scene of the murder she had witnessed. But the authority represented by the officer's navy-blue suit and silver shield had not been backed up by the efficiency she had dimly expected.

They had stood interminably at bay before the crowd, she and the policeman. He had intermittently grated out the old clichés, "Break it up" and "Move along, now," but the crowd had merely milled and eddied, flowing back a step, and then forward. The police car had been long in getting there, and when it did, there had been conferences and delays. Altogether, she must have leaned against the cold stone pillar in front of the apartment house for fifteen or more minutes before being ushered, not too gently, into a sedan and driven to the station house.

And now the relief she had at first found on arriving in the

police station was gone. It was almost one o'clock by the institutional-looking clock high on the wall over the raised desk. She had given her name and address, marital status, business address, and such standard data a number of times to a number of men, but for the past quarter of an hour she had sat, alone, ignored on a hard, uncomfortable bench in a corner of the big room.

She was fumbling toward a decision to take matters into her own hands, to do something, anything, to break the long pause, when one of the uniformed men strode over to her and said, "This way," and grasped her upper arm. She was tired of being grabbed firmly by the arm, but before she had made up her mind to protest, he had led her a few feet to her right, through a door, and into a very small room.

The room contained a desk and two chairs, and the single window opposite the door was barred. A man in a brown suit sat in the chair behind the desk.

The uniformed policeman guided her to the chair facing the man, and then left, closing the door behind him. There was silence while the man behind the desk filled in blanks on a form.

He was a thick man, heavy-looking, but, she estimated, not tall. He was hunched over the desk in such a way that all he presented to her was a fore-shortened oval of sparse iron-gray hair.

He spoke his first words without looking up. His voice was harsh. "Your name?"

"Dell Kenlon."

"Your *real* name." He peered up from under heavy eyebrows and disclosed a thick-featured, impassive face, with small, intelligent-looking, disagreeable eyes.

"That's my real name."

"All right, then, put it this way: give me your full name."

Dell said, "My full name is Dell Harrington Kenlon."

He looked at her expressionlessly for a minute and then said, "What does 'Dell' stand for?"

"I was christened Dell, just Dell," she said evenly.

"We'll pass it for the moment. Your age?"

"I've answered these questions outside—"

"Answer them again." There was a quality in his voice that Dell couldn't put her finger on, an out-of-place quality. "Your age?"

"Twenty-six."

"Married or single?"

"Widow." She knew what was wrong now: although abrupt, coldly impersonal on the surface, his interest was actually personal, avid.

"What were you doing five blocks away from the address you gave the officer at the desk as your home address?"

"What was I—?" The question was ridiculous, but she found it difficult to phrase her resentment. She said, "Is there some law forbidding me to leave my house?" But he didn't look up, and she found herself answering his question as if there were just such a law. "I was going to visit my mother."

"Do you work?"

"Yes."

"Well? Well?" He tapped the pencil on the desk and looked up impatiently from under the iron-gray eyebrows. The fact that he hadn't sat up or raised his chin was insulting, as if he hadn't considered her worth that much attention.

She sat up straighter and spoke distinctly. "I am a model at Geller and Reiss, on Seventh Avenue."

"A model," he repeated, and smiled for the first time. She wished he hadn't. "So you're a model and you live alone. What do you model?"

Indignation brought Dell's numbed senses alive. In a rush she became again all the things she had been before eleven thirty-five that morning. The door behind her opened, but she paid no attention to it. Her knees suddenly regained full muscular control, her mind was clear, her emotions were concentrated in the one overwhelming sensation of anger.

She got up out of her chair and spoke slowly and clearly. "I model dresses—high-necked dresses. And it's none of your business. I am a citizen—" The words echoed in her ears with a tired old ring, and she added, "I know that's a hackneyed phrase, but it's true, just the same. I'm supposed to be protected, not insulted. It's up to me to ask questions, not you. What happened? Who was the man who was killed? Why are you holding me here? Where is there a telephone? I've had a nasty experience, and I am going home and lie down. And"—it hit her with sudden force—"why haven't you asked me the important questions: what I saw, if I saw the man who did it, if I could identify—"

A voice behind her said, "All right, Orcutt."

She half turned. A big man in a tweed suit was standing in the doorway behind her, holding the door open with a clear invitation.

He repeated, "All right, Orcutt. That's enough."

The man at the desk said dispassionately, "Get out of here, Keeley."

Keeley said, "The captain sent me, George. *You* get out." His voice was very cold.

The two men stared at each other for a full deadlocked minute. Then Orcutt rose and moved around the desk. He chose to go around the side on which Dell was standing and so had to brush past her to reach the door. It was a deliberate gesture, almost a shove. Then he was out the door and it had closed behind him.

Dell measured the big man frigidly. Then she said, "I'm leaving here. Please get out of my way."

"Mrs. Kenlon, I'm sorry."

"I don't care how sorry you are, I've had enough. I'm—"

"Will you listen to me for just one minute?"

His voice was good—clear, even, intelligent. His face was good, too. His eyes were slightly squinted, and the resultant wrinkles were disarming. His mouth was big, full-lipped but firm, his nose was straight and rather small, which gave him a boyish look.

As she hesitated he went on, "We owe you an apology. You shouldn't have been kept waiting, but it took a little time to identify the dead man, and we always have a vast amount of red tape to go through. If you'll just tell me what happened, as briefly as you like, I'll tell you what we've discovered so far."

They were the first intelligent words she had heard in almost two hours. She said, "All right," and then, still standing, with one hand on the chair's back, she told the man about her morning.

She told it in brief, competent statements of fact, but as she spoke something of the emotional impact of the experience came through. One moment life had been routine, a little dull; the next three minutes had transformed it into melodrama. And when the whole world changes and the guide marks are gone, can one be sure that underneath things are as they were before?

It had been like every other Sunday morning in Manhattan in the spring, but Dell Kenlon wasn't used to being out at that hour, eleven thirty, and it was a novel experience to see a New York street, even a semiresidential street, so quiet, so deserted. The city, she realized, had split into two groups: the churchgoers and the loungers. Those who weren't in church were still in pajamas. She normally belonged to the lazy group, but the lovely day had beckoned her out into the fresh warm air. Now she was almost at

her mother's door and she was too early, since her mother was a churchgoer; but Dell had a key and had decided to surprise her mother by having a second breakfast ready for her when she returned.

As Dell rounded the corner and came abreast of the first of two enormous, dirty stone pillars that stood sentinel at the entrance to her mother's apartment house, there was a sharp, rather loud sound. Something swished behind her left ear, and then, seeming to move in the opposite direction, streaked past her nose. Her head was jerked by her surprise to the left, and there, in the edge of the pillar beside her, was a fresh white gash in the dirty gray.

Momentum carried her one step forward past the stone shaft and gave her the view, up thirty feet of driveway, to the massive iron doors of the building. Very near her, coming toward her, was a man, a shortish man, who had apparently just left the house. There was nothing unusual about him except that at that moment he sank to his knees, seemed to stare at her, and then fell forward at her feet. Mixed in with his falling were three more of the loud sounds.

Dell took a step backward, away from the man, and turned slowly around. There, across the street, standing in the doorway of a radio repair shop—closed, of course, on Sunday—was the man she had suddenly known would be there. In his right hand was the gun, smoke still curling gently from it. He put it into his pocket as she watched.

She had only a glimpse of his face, half in shadow under the brim of his low-pulled hat, but she could tell he was looking directly at her. They stood there, hypnotized for a moment, and then came the sound of running feet. Dell closed her eyes, weak with relief at the approach of help. When she opened them again the man had disappeared, swallowed by the gathering crowd.

People, alerted by the sound of shots, were pouring from the houses, pounding along the street toward Dell, surrounding her. She stood immobile, bracing herself against the shock of too many faces too close: curious eyes, opened mouths, a mass facial expression she had never seen before, a naked look with herself as its target. She tried to disentangle the faces, but they seemed all strangers.

She was alone before the crowd. Its members had an odd trick of ignoring her, while staring at her; asking one another questions as if she weren't there. Her sense of confusion deepened.

When, finally, she saw the blue-visored cap with its silver shield glinting in the sun she was grateful. And when the officer's hand closed on her arm Dell was glad he had come...

The big man in the tweed suit had listened with sympathy. When she finished, "And then they brought me here and I sat and sat—" he distracted her from her growing sense of panic by interrupting. "Well," he said in a matter-of-fact tone, "that's all very clear. Now, to answer your questions: the first shot ricocheted off the stone pillar. That was the swishing sound you heard. The bullet traced a triangle, with you inside its acute end. The next three shots all hit the man for whom they were intended. Now, you saw the man who did the shooting?"

Dell let her mind go back to the sunny street. She described what she had seen, and the impressions she had formed.

"All right," the detective said. "He was nice-looking, comparatively young. Thirty, would you say?"

She hesitated. "About that."

"Yes. Gray suit, gray topcoat, gray hat with black band. About six feet."

"As near as I could tell."

"But you couldn't see his eyes, you didn't notice the color of his tie, and you don't know what kind of a gun it was."

"Mr.—" She paused.

"Keeley. Lieutenant Keeley."

"Lieutenant Keeley, I never saw a gun before. Never. How could I—" She stopped because he was smiling. It was a smile with real amusement in it and, without understanding its cause, she found herself smiling with him.

He said, "We deal with so many people who are very, very familiar with guns that it becomes difficult to realize that the majority of New Yorkers have never seen one close up. . . Would you recognize him, Mrs. Kenlon?"

Dell hesitated. "That's hard to answer," she said finally. "I have a clear impression of him standing there, with a gun in his hand. But if he was simply to pass me on the street I'm not so sure. He looked so—so average somehow."

"Well, that makes sense."

He moved away from the door, around the desk. "Sit down for a minute," he suggested. He waited until she was seated before he sat down behind the desk.

"Let me explain something to you." He sat squarely in the

chair, staring down at his large competent-looking hands. When he looked up his face was very earnest.

"We think we know who fired those shots, because of the history of the dead man. Your description of the gunman tends to confirm our opinion. If we can put our hands on him you will probably be able to identify him. But if you are *not* able to identify him we can be as sure of ourselves as we wish and we still won't be able to make it stick. If he can't prove where he was at eleven thirty-five—so what? A jury would decide, and rightly, that thousands of people can't prove where they were at exactly eleven thirty-five Sunday morning. So you see—" He seemed to run out of words.

Dell wasn't sure she did see. He obviously wanted something from her, but what? Stories she had read and seen enacted, stories that dealt with frightened witnesses, ran through her mind.

"If I can identify him," she said earnestly, "I will. I wouldn't be afraid to, if that's what you mean."

"Well, that isn't exactly what I mean. You see, he saw you, too. He's probably not a stupid man. I don't think he'll miss the obvious fact that you are a—a threat."

She felt the terrible unreality coming back over her. "Do you mean that he'll try to—?"

He spoke quickly and reassuringly. "Well, that's what I mean, but it's a very unlikely event. First of all, it would be dangerous for him to try it, of course. Simpler just to get out of town. And, anyway, he doesn't know where to find you. You say no one in the crowd knew you. That's a piece of luck. You just stay away from your mother's house and you should be in no danger. To be on the safe side, don't mention your involvement to your mother or anyone else. That'll take restraint." He measured her with his eyes and added, "But I think you can do it."

"I really don't think you're in danger," he repeated. "I just felt it would be fairer if you were aware of all the facets of the situation. Now"—he stood up—"you go home and get that rest you were telling Orcutt about when I came in." He smiled in sympathetic memory of her tirade.

She got up and preceded him to the door. There she turned and asked, "But who was the murdered man?"

"His name was Sedgley Mathias. He was once a police detective."

"Oh. And who do you think killed him?"

He hesitated. Then he said, "Well, we think it was a man named Orcutt, William Orcutt."

She said, "Oh," again, but as he reached for the doorknob she drew back, blocking his way. She motioned at the desk. She said, "But that man—"

"Yes," he said. "William Orcutt is Lieutenant Orcutt's brother."

When they had crossed the general room and reached the door he touched her arm, stopping her. "Down the hall," he said, "the room on the right will have some reporters in it. I'll handle them; you had better say nothing. Don't be nervous. There won't be a mob, just a few men."

As they moved down the hall Keeley started past the open door on the right, but he didn't make it. A man called out, "Hey, Lieutenant! That the witness?"

There were three men in the room. One was elderly and sloppy; one was middle-aged and prissy-looking; the third came nearest the traditional movie reporter, except that in addition to being young and good-looking he was extremely well dressed.

Keeley turned slowly around and stood in the doorway. His bulk almost filled the opening, and very little of Dell was visible to the three men inside. Keeley said to the prissy-looking man. "Yeah, Dunn. This is the young lady."

"What's her name, Lieutenant? Come on in."

Keeley said, "No." Dell couldn't see his face, but his voice, crisp and professional, sounded very different.

"Look," he said, "I'm not one for baloney. And I've never handed you any dramatics. I'm not going to pull any now. I'll leave it to your common sense. She's the only one who can identify the guy. Her name and address in the papers would tip him off. It's standard knowledge that the penalty for two is no greater than the chair for one. Get it?"

There was a pause. Then Keeley added, "Now I know no one is going to try to get any silly beats on this. It would cost you your jobs, in fact, since no editor wants blood news. But in case you talk in your sleep I think it's just as well you don't know her name or address." He moved aside so that they could see Dell. "It's too bad, though, that your readers will have no way of knowing that just for once the 'young, beautiful, mysterious witness being shielded by the police' is on-the-level young and beautiful." He looked down at Dell expressionlessly.

The prissy man said, "She sure is. Okay. Wish you luck, hon-

ey." The old man looked bored. The young man looked very much interested.

Keeley piloted Dell away.

Outside, on the stone landing at the top of the four steps leading to the sidewalk, Keeley stood still and looked uncertain.

She said, "Thank you, Lieutenant. I may go home now?"

"Yes, Mrs. Kenlon. I—I'd like to take you, but I'm—"

She was surprised. She hadn't expected the offer, even the negative offer, and he looked flustered. He had been very self-contained up to that moment. She thought again that he had a nice face.

She said, "Thanks just the same, but I'll be fine. I'll take a cab."

"There's a cab stand at the corner, half a block down."

She started toward the steps, then stopped. "You'll be in touch with me?"

"Certainly. I'll call you. That is, we—" He stopped.

She said, with amusement, "Thank you, Lieutenant."

The street was still sunny and warm, and the world was probably the same as it had always been. She walked quickly toward the corner. She would go home, call her mother, eat lunch, and take a nap. Then she would try to see her morning in proper perspective. Perhaps if she stood back from it, it could even be made to seem exciting.

She stopped dead. A man with a shock of blond hair that looked like a wig had leaped out of a car a few feet ahead of her and, in a lightning gesture, had planted himself directly in her path. He was aiming something, aiming—

There was a click, and Dell, fighting against the first threatened faint of her life, reached wildly for something to hold on to. Surprisingly, there was a hand beside her and an arm supporting her shoulders. She rested against the arm and fought the blackness.

A voice over her shoulder said, with restrained fury, "Peters, can't you ever get a camera shot without scaring a person to death? What are you playing—junior G-man? Anyway, we can't use pictures."

The arm turned Dell gently around. "Are you all right, miss?"

Dell looked up into the worried eyes of the good-looking young man who had been in the reporters' room. She struggled to say she was all right, but shock on shock had been too much. She didn't seem able to open her mouth.

"Peters, open the back door. . . . Here, sit down in here. Get your breath."

He guided her into the car and she rested her head against the back of the seat while he, rather pointlessly, she thought, rubbed her hands between his. His face was full of concern.

After a minute she said, "I'm really all right. It was just that on top of the other—"

"Sure, I know." He looked relieved. "We'll take you home."

"I can get a cab—"

He waved an airy hand. "Not a chance. Come on, Pete. You drive."

The cameraman pulled his shock of hair out of the back window and got into the front seat. He shot Dell a penitent glance, but all he said was, "Where to?"

She gave him her address and then relaxed against the back of the seat. There was silence while they pulled away from the curb and then Dell said, "I'm really sorry to have caused such a fuss."

"All Pete's fault. You must have had quite a morning."

"It has been quite upsetting. You're one of the reporters, aren't you?" To his nod she added, "Is it hard on you not to get the details of the story?"

He laughed. "Well, a little, but I'll survive. No one is going to hold me responsible, anyway, because I usually do features. Sunday-supplement kind of stuff, you know."

The cameraman spoke up, impelled, Dell decided from his tone of voice, by simple hero worship. "I don't know what it's all about, lady, but no pix, and now you say no story. It must be killing him. He's got a rep for showing up the cops. If he can't say nothing, Jim'll die."

The reporter laughed again. "I'll try to hang on," he said. "But thanks for the buildup."

At the door he handed her gently out of the car and then, standing on the curb beside the open door, asked, "You'll be all right?"

"Fine, now. And thanks for the ride."

"Least we could do. I'll call later, if I may, to find out if you're really okay." The "if I may," she decided, was mere terminology.

He turned toward the car door and then back to her. "My name is Barlow. Jim Barlow. And yours?"

"Dell Kenlon." She paused and then added slowly, "You weren't supposed to know that."

"Oh"—the hand wave came into play—"you heard Keeley. I wouldn't dream of using it. But I wouldn't be able to get you on the phone unless I knew your name, would I, Miss Kenlon?" He smiled, showing white teeth.

And Dell suddenly felt that he was more than good-looking; he was startlingly handsome. She said, "Mrs. Kenlon."

His pause wasn't an instant long. He said smoothly, "Well, then, Mr. Kenlon will be taking care of you, won't he?"

She said slowly, "No. No, he won't." She turned and walked up the steps of her little converted apartment house, leaving him on the sidewalk, hat in hand, looking gratified.

At eleven that night, even though she had had a two-hour nap in the late afternoon, Dell was more than ready to go to bed. She was feeling better, almost normal, but very tired. As she went through the routine of getting to bed she found herself thinking of the two men, Barlow and Keeley, as a study in contrasts. The reporter, slender, smooth, handsome, and very engaging. The lieutenant, square, solid, shy—and very engaging.

She went from room to room closing the windows. Most of them were actually doors, great plate-glass panes set in wrought iron, extending from the floor almost to the lofty ceilings, and opening onto miniature balconies.

She loved the apartment—its big rooms, its high ceilings, and its beautiful floors. It was, of course, too big for a woman alone, but she and Max had lived in it and loved it, and she had long before given up the struggle with her conscience, which told her the apartment was a ridiculous extravagance.

She went into the kitchen and, leaning against the long natural-wood cabinet Max had built in, drank a glass of milk. Then she took the paper bag out of the garbage container and went to her service entrance.

Laced onto the rear of the house was what, in mundane terms, could be called a fire escape, but for beauty and convenience it outdid any fire escape ever built. Made of the most delicate and graceful wrought iron, it was sturdy and wide, and it looked like a part of the old house, not a last-minute appendage. It was used for deliveries and pickups: laundry, milk, garbage. On summer evenings she and Max had sat on its spacious platform, and looked down into the beautiful, overgrown garden that ran the length of the block between the streets—one of the many hidden Manhattan gardens that out-of-towners never know exist. In this

case, the street's tenants had been wise enough not to partition the garden into little rectangles.

She put the garbage in its outdoor receptacle, disguised by Max to look like a tool box, and then stood looking dreamily down at the dim garden four stories below. Something white at her feet caught her attention. She realized it was the Sunday paper, delivered that morning and ignored in the confusion of the day. She bent to pick it up. There was a report, and then, beside her, the now familiar sound of a bullet biting into stone.

Dell lay on her stomach. The iron was cold.

"I wonder if I was in the apex of *that* triangle?" she thought, almost dreamily. The next one...

The realization that there might be another bullet brought a sudden, urgent clarity to her thoughts. There was no way back into the apartment except through the kitchen door. The only light on in the kitchen was the concealed tube under the hanging cabinets, but that was enough to make a pale outline of the open doorway.

Nevertheless, there was no other way in. She had to get through the doorway.

Dell moved as she had seen soldiers do in the movies, dragging her body along by the elbows. It was even more difficult than it looked. Beneath the sill of the doorway she rested, and then decided it would be less risky to make an upright dash through the opening than to try to slither over the doorsill. She gathered strength and breath, rose, and burst through the opening. She closed the door in a split second, but nevertheless a second bullet hit it before it was completely closed. She had always resented the weight of the heavy iron door; she would never resent it again.

She put out the light in the kitchen, snapped off the lamp in the hall, and crawled into her bedroom, where she turned off the one of the two bedside lamps that was lit. Then, safe in the darkness, she latched the only window she had left open, the bedroom window, drew the heavy draperies across it and, in the pitch-darkness, felt her way to the phone. As she reached for it, it rang loudly in the stillness, and her heart climbed into her throat from the unexpectedness of the sound. Then she picked up the receiver and said weakly, "Hello?"

"This is Jim Barlow, Mrs. Kenlon. I know it's late to call you, but I got caught up in some business, couldn't get away. You weren't asleep, were you? How are you feeling?" There was a

pause, and then, in a sharper voice, the reporter said, "Mrs. Kenlon?"

Dell said, in a flat tone, "Someone just shot me."

"Shot you! Where are you hit? . . . Mrs. Kenlon, answer me!"

"No," she said. "No. That was wrong. Someone shot *at* me. Twice. I'm not hit. I'm just—I'm just—"

"All right. Lock yourself in. I'll be right there. Take me ten minutes, maybe less. I'll ring five times, short rings. Don't let anyone else in." The phone clicked.

Dell stared at the receiver. Then she depressed the cradle and called the police. After what seemed an interminable number of transfers she finally convinced the last man that he could not help her, that no one could help her except Lieutenant Keeley.

"Well," he said, "Lieutenant Keeley is off duty, but if it's as important as all that I guess you can call him at home." He gave her a telephone number.

The phone rang only once before Keeley said, "Yes?"

By that time she was entirely coherent.

Keeley said, "I see. I see. All right. I'll be right over." He repeated her address. "I'll press the bell three times—long deliberate rings. Don't open the door to anyone else."

He disconnected and she was alone again in the dark house. But not for long, she felt, on a note of rising hysteria. At any minute the doorbell would be sounding off in various and complicated signals. . . The absurdity of it overcame her panic.

She felt her way into the bathroom where, since it had no windows, she could turn on a light. She combed her hair and put on lipstick. Before she had quite finished, the doorbell pealed five times, quickly. "The reporter," she thought, "if I have my code straight."

It was Barlow, and when she saw his face in the light from the outside hallway her sense of amusement left her abruptly. Concern, honest and deep concern, was plainly written on his face. He said, "You're not hurt? You're really all right?"

She closed the door and pressed the light switch on its left. Instead of a lamp or an overhead light, the switch controlled the small tapered bulbs concealed beneath the paintings on the walls, and the hall bloomed into soft and lovely radiance.

"Yes," she said. "I really am all right. Let's sit here in the hall, so we won't be within reach of any of the windows."

But he stood still, looking at the walls. "What beautiful—oh," he said. "You must be Max Kenlon's widow."

"Yes, those are Max's."

The doorbell rang, three long rings, and she moved to open the door. Barlow came out of his picture-filled trance a second too late. He said sharply, "Don't!"

Keeley, standing in the doorway, said, "Don't what?"

"I was going to say, 'Don't open the door,' but—"

"Were you? And how did you get in here?"

"Same way you did. How do you think I got in—through the window?"

"No, I thought maybe you shot through the window."

Barlow put his hat on the table with quiet deliberation, then turned around so that he was squarely facing Keeley. He said, "Did you, now? That's an interesting idea. It's also insulting, slanderous, and worthy of action."

"Really? Well, then, why don't you try taking action? But, although we both know you think you're smarter than the police, it's still my duty to point out you're not supposed to know where Mrs. Kenlon lives. You have no right here, and you got here awfully fast."

"I'm not the only one who knows where Mrs. Kenlon lives."

"No? Who else does? Your paper's entire circulation?"

"No, Keeley, they don't," Barlow said. "You do."

The lieutenant took one quick step forward, and Dell put her hand on his arm. She said, "Don't you think, Lieutenant Keeley, that we ought to close the door?"

The two men looked at her as if they had forgotten her existence. She put the thought into words. "It seems to me that you are both missing the point. Bullets—bullets"—her voice shook with incredulity—"have been raining around me. And all I was doing was just putting out the garbage—" She caught her breath.

Keeley's face had lost its antagonism. He closed the door and leaned back against it. His voice was very gentle. "You're right, Mrs. Kenlon. We were missing the point. Tell me what happened."

Dell told him. It was amazing, she thought, how anything so shocking, so foreign to all her past life, could be condensed into a few brief statements of insane fact. "The shot hit the wall; there'll be a mark, I imagine... I lay on my stomach... Another bullet hit the back door..."

"And then you both came," she finished. She put her hand to her head in an unconscious little gesture of confusion. "There was

something else. . . Oh, yes. While you two were—discussing—the rather absurd possibilities, I was thinking that there's someone else who knows where I live."

Keeley said, "Who?"

"Lieutenant Orcutt."

"Oh. Well, that's a legitimate point. I think I'd better explain the situation to you. Can we sit somewhere?" He waved his hat in a rather helpless fashion.

"I thought we ought to stay here, away from the windows."

Barlow said to Keeley, "Aren't you going to take a look around outside? Or don't you care?"

Keeley's face was stony. "You think he's waiting out there for me? Aren't you going to go home? Or don't you have one?"

Dell said, "Please." Her face twisted a little.

Keeley said, "I'm sorry. Let's sit down."

The hall had been furnished, not as a place to lounge in, but as a passageway and a gallery, and so as they sat in three of the four straight chairs, they looked and felt stiff and uncomfortable. The men sat at either end of the long narrow table, and Dell sat between them.

As he settled into his chair Keeley looked up at the walls, at each glowing frame in its individual soft light, and said, "Max Kenlon's?"

"Yes."

"Oh." He absorbed the knowledge with less surprise than Barlow had shown. "Well, about George Orcutt. I don't think he has a thing to do with Mathias' death, but I'm surprised the name hasn't clicked with you. It looks like an upsurge of the Orcutt case, you see."

Dell looked blank.

"You don't remember it? Well, it was quite a sensation about seven years ago. Perhaps it made a greater impression on me than on most people because I was new on the force. Then, too, I originally came from Staten Island.

"There was this family who lived on Staten Island. Name was Orcutt. That is, the main branch was named Orcutt; there were dozens of cousins and in-laws. They ruled the island in a way, but everyone thought it was an okay way. They owned lumberyards, a contracting business, and a cement business. Two of 'em held high civic offices. All very honorable.

"And then one day a Manhattan cop, a captain of police, spilled

everything. No one has ever been sure why he decided to talk, and he never explained. He was Sedgley Mathias, the man who was killed today. Either he got religion, which seems very much out of character, or, more likely, he was cheated on a payoff and got so mad he figured it was worth it.

"Whatever his reasons, from what Mathias had to say it became very clear that the Orcutt gang was running not only Staten Island but a large part of the five boroughs. There weren't many outsiders like Sedgley Mathias in the deal; it was nearly all family. There were Williamses, Barolas, and—well, I've forgotten all the relatives' names. They were cops; they were in City Hall; they were all over the place.

"It was a big newspaper sensation, of course, because it had a kind of feudal touch. At first it was even romantic, in a sort of nasty way. But more and more stuff came out and pretty soon it wasn't just a matter of graft and corrupting of officials—it was blackmail and arson and murder."

Barlow said, "It made an impression on me, too. I had just got my first reporting job. And since then I've rehashed it in articles a number of times. Two of the men went to the chair."

Dell again had the feeling that the two men had forgotten her. They were talking to her, it was true, but they were bound together by an interest that she couldn't begin to share, didn't want to share. Politics, corruption, murder, people who "went to the chair"—these things could not be real to her. Even if, as Keeley seemed to be implying, she was standing in a storm of bullets as a result of these Staten Island events, her desire was only to make the storm stop, not to understand what had started it.

But she saw that to Barlow and Keeley it was a professionally intriguing puzzle, and the antagonism which had hummed between them a few minutes earlier had given way to an impersonal but mutual fascination.

Keeley said, "Yes, two men went to the chair—the patriarch, Daniel Orcutt, and his oldest son, Sam. Half a dozen others went to prison for varying terms. But that wasn't the end of the Orcutts. Some hereditary strain seems to be at work. We're constantly picking up men, for everything from petty larceny to murder, who turn out to have Orcutt blood."

Dell said, "Like Lieutenant Orcutt."

Keeley hesitated. "Yes, we can't get around the fact that George is an Orcutt. Daniel Orcutt had three sons: Samuel was executed;

George was a young cop who had broken with his family; William was a kid who was ignored at the time, but has since created quite a ruckus."

"So you think William shot Mathias?" Barlow asked interestedly.

"We think so. He turned up in the West some time ago, behaving like a traditional bad man—holding up banks in small towns and so on. He gave his real name on three or four occasions, and there is enough surrounding evidence to be pretty certain he is really William Orcutt. He's never been caught, never been fingerprinted or photographed, but descriptions all tally with the one Mrs. Kenlon gave me this morning. On the few occasions he opened his mouth he spoke rather vaguely of 'revenge.' "

Barlow said, "It seems to me you are going off half cocked. Mathias wasn't too lily-white a character. Maybe a lot of people would be willing to promote his death."

"Mathias went to jail for five years. Since he came out he has been working as a salesman in the wholesale-grocery business. His wife had divorced him while he was in prison, and she now lives, under another name, with her two children, in the same building as Mrs. Harrington, Mrs. Kenlon's mother. Mathias had been making his usual Sunday visit to the children this morning."

Keeley paused. Then he added, "The big point is this: during the last month headquarters has received three letters. They were identical, and very much in the old-fashioned, melodramatic pattern of a bad man. They said, 'Mathias will die. Revenge will be had.' "

There was a little silence. Then Barlow said, "All right. Maybe your guess is good, maybe it's the young Orcutt. What are you doing about it? Why aren't you outside seeing what you can find out?"

Keeley said, "Don't be a fool! I called before I left my house. Four men met me downstairs. They're doing the routine—taking footprint casts if there are any prints, checking on the roof, and so on. Just because you've appointed yourself unofficial examiner of the police department—"

Barlow snapped, "My articles have helped get a lot of innocent men out of jail."

"Your articles have helped get a lot of hardened criminals out of jail."

"You're changing the subject." Barlow's face was set in stubborn

lines which, instead of detracting from his handsomeness, somehow made it the more noticeable. "What about the angle of the bullets? If you'd look—"

"You'd better stick to your job," Keeley said coldly, "because, as usual, you're not doing very well at mine. Didn't you hear Mrs. Kenlon? One shot hit a stone wall, one a steel door. *What* bullets? A nick in stone or a scratch on paint doesn't give us an angle."

"Well, aren't you going to look for the guy?"

"Yes, we're going to look for him!" Keeley bellowed. He stopped, took a deep breath, and said, "Meanwhile, you can explain what you are doing here."

Barlow didn't seem to hear the question. He examined a painting on the opposite wall, presenting Keeley with a view of his excellent profile.

Dell said hastily, "I can explain that." She told Keeley about her meeting with Barlow and Peters.

Instead of being appeased, Keeley looked angrier and redder. "So still another person, a news photographer named Peters, knows where Mrs. Kenlon lives."

Barlow said, "And Pete Peters is an amateur artist. Perhaps he was jealous of Max Kenlon's genius."

"What happened to the picture Peters took?"

"I told him to destroy the negative and the one print he made. You think that was ungallant of me?"

The flat of Keeley's hand hit the hall table with a crash. "Stop clowning!"

Barlow raised his voice. "Well, stop acting as if it were all my fault! I'm as anxious as you—" He stopped abruptly, as if he had heard the loudness of his voice; as if, perhaps, he had suddenly become aware that the object of his anxiety was sitting quietly by while he and Keeley shouted.

There was another little silence, and then Keeley turned to Dell. He looked embarrassed. "I apologize for this—this bickering. I—we are anxious. This afternoon I was really sure you would be in the clear; it's a blow to me to learn otherwise. I'll go downstairs now and see if my men have learned anything. I'll be back in the morning with a ballistics expert. We'll take a look in daylight. Meanwhile, I'll leave two men—one front, one back."

Dell was pale with exhaustion. "Will I have to stay indoors tomorrow?" she asked listlessly.

"No, but please don't go to work. The garment district is too

thickly populated. If you'll stay out of crowds you'll be okay, because one of my men will be right behind you, wherever you go—one step behind you at all times."

Dell said slowly, "About Lieutenant Orcutt—"

"Yes, Mrs. Kenlon?" Keeley looked tired, too. Tired but dogged.

"Well, I don't really understand. You admit that these Orcutts are bad. You mention heredity, but you absolve him."

"I don't absolve him, Mrs. Kenlon; I don't even like him very much. But I just don't think, on the basis of his record, that he is implicated. He was the Orcutt maverick. Just as respectable families sometimes have a black sheep, he was the white sheep in his."

"But he was—outrageous to me!"

"I know." Keeley looked reflective. "I think it was shock. Fury at knowing what he was about to go through again. The understandable hope that it just wasn't happening. I think, before he got himself in hand, he had some sort of blind, blundering thought that he could discredit you and make it all untrue. Not nice of him, I admit, but a very human reaction." Keeley stood up. He said to Barlow, "Coming?"

Barlow rose reluctantly. "Can I get you anything?" he asked Dell.

"I'll be fine, thanks." She smiled her gratitude.

Keeley walked abruptly to the door, flung it open, and marched the few feet across the outer hall to the self-service elevator.

Barlow started slowly after him, but stopped in the open doorway and said in a low voice, "Perhaps if I call you—perhaps we can go to some quiet place for dinner tomorrow evening?"

Some of his smoothness was gone. He seemed uncertain, and he was even nicer that way, Dell thought. She looked past him at the lieutenant's back. Keeley was standing stolidly facing the elevator. "Yes," she said to Barlow. "Perhaps we can." She raised her voice. "Good night, Lieutenant Keeley," she called.

"Good night, Mrs. Kenlon." His voice was pleasant, but he didn't turn around.

At nine the next morning Dell called Mr. Geller and explained that she wouldn't be able to get to work because she had a bad cold. Geller was so nice about it that she was ashamed. Yesterday she had been forced to lie to her mother; today, to Mr. Geller.

Keeley appeared at ten o'clock with two other men. He was

very formal with her. She repeated her story once more and demonstrated what had happened out on the fire escape. In the light of day, with the lush new-green of the garden blanketing the ground below her, the nighttime experience seemed remote, almost impossible. But the nicks were there: white on gray stone; orange on black iron.

The men spent considerable time talking about "angles of this" and "angles of that" but she had the feeling that they were getting nowhere, and knew it.

Then Keeley joined her in the sun-flooded living room. He didn't sit down but wandered around the room, looking carefully at the paintings on the walls.

To Dell his presence carried a kind of significance she refused to think through. It seemed odd for him to be in the room, she thought, and tried to leave the thought there. But it wouldn't be left. Perhaps, she decided, her vague feeling of unrest grew out of the fact that he didn't *look* odd. His open, boyish face was nothing like Max's wonderful dark homeliness which had been a part of his compelling personality. But Keeley's bigness, the set of his shoulders as he stood examining a magnificent crowd scene, were reminiscent of Max.

In an effort to forget that resemblance she asked a question she immediately felt was awkward. "Do you like his work?"

Keeley turned to face her, surprise clearly written on his pleasant face. "Of course. Did he have a single adverse critic?" He was obviously sincere.

She laughed. "A few." She sobered. "But even they thought that in time. . ." Her voice trailed off.

He completed the thought. "And he didn't get the time."

"No."

He moved on to another picture and, with his back to her, said, "They say war is no respecter of persons, but it *should be*. Hands of such genius should not be asked to hold a rifle. . . These pictures are magnificent, breathtaking. Even if, like me, you don't know anything about it. You just don't have to know anything about art to appreciate the color, for instance."

There was a moment of silence, and then he said over his shoulder, "These are originals, of course? I don't remember ever having seen even a print of that one of the crowd."

"They're the originals. In the bedroom I have reproductions of some that hang in museums and in private collections."

"I see. Then these"—he waved his arm to indicate the four walls—"and the ones in the hall must represent a lot of money?"

She said stiffly, "Why, yes, I suppose so." She was disappointed.

He looked abstracted. "But if you hold on to them I suppose their value is bound to go up."

"Most likely. But I don't intend to sell them. Ever."

"But you've had offers?" He looked down at her, and all of a sudden his abstraction fled and in its place came the slow reddening. He said, "I'm sorry. I didn't realize I was being rude."

She felt indefinably better. "That's all right. I presume it's a natural question. But I have no intention of selling them. With what Max left me, and my salary, I'm quite all right. And I want these with me."

"But you've undoubtedly had offers. Any particularly persistent would-be buyers?"

She stared at him. "Why, yes. A few."

"I see. All recognized dealers or collectors?"

"I think so. Why?"

"Well—" He seemed at a loss for words, as if he weren't sure himself of the answer. "I'm looking—fumbling, I guess—for a connection. Money is always a motive, and these pictures represent a lot of money."

"Connection? With what?"

"Mathias' apartment—his own, not his wife's—is a very plush affair. He has a few Kenlon prints, and one small original. I've been checking up. He must have paid around a thousand dollars for that oil."

Dell felt the confusion coming over her again. Since the lieutenant had entered the apartment she had felt safe; he was *supposed* to make her safe, she thought. She felt an unreasonable resentment at his presenting this new theory, which upset everything.

She said abruptly, "Wait. Wait." She sat down on the couch and spoke more quietly. "But Orcutt—William Orcutt. I thought—"

"Yes." Keeley sat in a chair facing her, leaned forward, and started slowly twirling his hat between his knees. "Yes. I gave you that idea, I know. But the whole business is beginning to look wrong. Cloudy, confused."

"But you can't be confused!" Dell protested.

He looked up quickly, and his eyes caught and held hers. "You mean I'm the doctor and I've got to supply a correct diagnosis?"

She didn't say anything.

"It's flattering of you, Mrs. Kenlon. But doctors don't always hit it on the first try. It doesn't mean I won't take care of you. It's just that the sooner I get it straight, the safer you'll be."

"It's not only being safe." She didn't know how to explain. She tried. "I'm the 'eyewitness,' I'm the 'innocent bystander,' the mysterious woman being protected by the police. These are fantastic things—things you read about others, but never *are* yourself. I've tried to accept that, but now you're suggesting something else—that there's a connection of some kind between me and these people who—who hold up banks, and are crooked policemen and—"

She paused, then said agitatedly, "But it's a ridiculous suggestion! I was just going to my mother's. I was just—"

"I know." As on the previous day he interrupted her to save her from panic. But then he dropped his eyes again and stared down at the hat, as he moved it slowly around between his hands. He said, "But I'd be a bad doctor if I didn't recognize and take into consideration all the symptoms. I thought it was Orcutt. It's still possible. But the coincidence of Mathias' pictures made me wonder..." He stopped. "Well," he said, "we'll see."

He asked a few more questions about the shooting on the fire escape, then left rather abruptly. She felt thoroughly confused and almost overwhelmed by a sense of foreboding...

By five o'clock, when Barlow called, she was feeling like a caged mouse. She had begun to realize that her listlessness was at least partially the result of lack of air and exercise. Policemen might be stationed in front and back of the house, but Dell found herself unable to open her windows or even to draw the draperies apart.

Barlow's pleasant voice came over the telephone like a deliverance. She assured him she would be delighted to have dinner with him and agreed that six thirty would be fine. Later, when she opened the door to him, his handsome face was nice to see, like that of an old friend.

She had never been in the restaurant before. It was called The Jade Garden, and jade the room was, an even tone of deep, restful, soft green—rugs, ceiling, walls, shrubbery. The white table-cloths shone invitingly against the soothing background. The headwaiter found them a table in a far corner of the room.

Dell settled into her chair and listened to Barlow. He was gay

and amusing, and with his every word she felt herself relaxing more and more. When the waiter came up and stood with pencil poised, Barlow suggested steak, and Dell agreed. As the waiter went off, Barlow put his arms on the table and leaned toward her, smiling.

"Were you in the dumps?" he asked.

Dell found herself thinking that his teeth formed another white accent to the room's décor. There was something about him—was it his handsomeness?—that made Dell feel he was just a little too good to be true. She said, "Yes, I was."

"Did the stalwart lieutenant—" The headwaiter was hovering, and Barlow looked up.

"Excuse me, sir, but I believe you are wanted on the phone."

Barlow started to rise, then immediately dropped back into his seat. "That's impossible," he said.

"Aren't you Mr. James Barlow?"

"Yes, but no one knows I'm here. I didn't make a reservation. How did you—?"

The headwaiter was polite but hurried. He clearly had other duties. "The gentleman on the phone described you and the lady very definitely, and he gave me your name. The phone is in the foyer on the right." He sketched a bow and moved away.

Barlow looked at Dell and shrugged. "I don't get it, but excuse me, will you? Right back."

Dell watched him cross the big room. She felt a vague uneasiness.

He returned to the table in a very short time. He looked upset. "Dell, I'm sorry." She noted the use of her first name; it was the first time he had called her by it. "That was Peters—Peter Peters, you know?" She nodded. "Well, he's practically incoherent. I couldn't understand most of what he said, but I did get the fact that he's down at the corner in a drug store and wants me to come there for a minute. He refused to come here—said he couldn't." He paused and frowned. "'Couldn't'—a funny word. I'm worried about him. Do you mind?"

"Go ahead. I'll be fine. Really."

"All right." He hesitated; then he added, "I'll be right back." He flipped his hand in the little gesture he used so well and for so many meanings. This time it translated to "I'll be seeing you." Then he walked quickly back toward the door. On the way he stopped briefly to talk to a waiter, and then mounted the two

steps to the foyer. As the front door closed she noticed that he hadn't bothered to get his coat from the checkroom.

A few minutes later the waiter brought Dell an order of oysters. The gentleman had instructed him, he said, to serve madam's dinner. The gentleman would catch up when he returned.

Dell ate her way through the oysters; then she had some soup and a few bites of steak before her uneasiness crescendoed into dismay. It was certainly a half hour since Barlow had gone through the door; it seemed to her she should do something, but what?

Should she leave? But that would be rude, and, besides, in spite of the existence of the police guard—a shadowy figure Jim Barlow had pointed out when they left her house—she would feel unsafe on the street. She would feel alone, police or no police. And, as a further ridiculous point, she doubted that she had enough money with her to pay the check.

Call the lieutenant?—she corrected herself—call the police? But what could she say? That she had been deserted by her escort?

She had stopped eating and was sitting very straight, hands clasped tightly in her lap, when the tall young man in the gray topcoat and fedora came through the steps and looked around the door. He stopped at the head of the room. Then he saw Dell, removed his hat, and crossed to her table.

He leaned down slightly. "Mrs. Kenlon." There was no question mark, but she nodded rigidly. "I've come to take you home." He paused. "Unless you'd like to finish your dinner," he added politely.

"No. No. I don't want—Who are you?"

He looked surprised. "I thought you saw me across the street from your apartment. I'm the detective assigned to you. Police."

"Oh." The shadowy figure Barlow had pointed out. Dell gathered her purse and gloves and rose; when she reached for her coat he was holding it for her. But instead of lifting her arms she stood motionless. She said over her shoulder, "I don't think I can pay the check."

He said, "Your coat." And then, reassuringly. "Don't worry about the check."

The people at the next table were staring. She had come with one man, eaten alone, and now another man was urging her to leave. She quickly got her arms into the sleeves of her coat and then moved rapidly toward the exit.

She mounted the thick-carpeted steps to the foyer and then waited while the man said a few words to the headwaiter. Then he climbed the steps and came toward her.

Until that moment Dell had been standing, passively waiting, but just before he reached her she turned decisively, walked to the checkroom counter, and sat beside it on a small straight chair upholstered in jade velvet. As he came up to her she said, "No."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said, 'No.' I'm not going anywhere with you."

He looked bewildered. "But I just want to take you home, Mrs. Kenlon."

She put her hand to her forehead. She felt as confused as she had the previous morning. "Where's Mr. Barlow?" she asked. "Why didn't he come back?"

"Mr. Barlow is—unable to come. I'll show you my credentials."

"I won't go with you." That much she was sure of.

He stood in front of her, looking rather foolish. The hat-check girl was watching him with a carefully expressionless face.

Dell ignored him. What time would the place close? she wondered as she looked past him toward the dining room. Well, she'd just sit for a while. Something would happen to clear her mind. Something...

The man in gray said, "I guess I understand, Mrs. Kenlon." He walked stiffly across the small foyer into the telephone booth. When he came out he sat opposite her on the chair beside the booth. It seemed too small for him.

And then they sat quietly, ten feet apart. There was almost no traffic. The dinner hour was well on its way, but not far enough along so that people were leaving. The green carpeting had a deep lush pile and the ceiling was efficiently soundproofed. Dell and the man seemed almost alone in a silent green world.

Dell had no idea of how long they held their stiff positions, but when the door opened and Lieutenant Keeley came in it suddenly seemed as if hours had passed. He took two steps inside the door, and then Dell was there in front of him; she had run across the little distance. He took one look at her white face and moved the extra step toward her.

His suit was a scratchy tweed material, but it seemed to Dell, leaning against him, to feel comfortable, exactly as it should feel. His right arm encircling her shoulders was very tight, very secure. She stood still.

Over her shoulder the voice of the young detective said, "I'm sorry, Lieutenant. She wouldn't budge."

"Well, of course she wouldn't. She's frightened." Keeley sounded angry. But not at her, Dell thought. Not at the young man, either.

"Oh. Well, I thought you'd think I should have—"

Keeley interrupted, but more gently, "Never mind. You did right to call me."

There was a little silence, then the young man said, "Shouldn't we—?" He cleared his throat. "People are..." His voice trailed off.

Keeley said calmly, "The heck with people."

People, Dell thought. Hat-check girl. Headwaiter. People in the dining room. She brought her face away from the tweed suit and made a small backward motion. Instantly, without seeming to move, Lieutenant Keeley retreated. His face was entirely impersonal. He said, "Shall we go home now?"

Dell said, "Yes. I'm sorry to have—I'm sure you're busy. I'll go with this young man now."

"I'll take you," Keeley said.

They rode home in a sedan that had been parked in front of the restaurant. Keeley sat in back with Dell; the young man sat in front with a third man who had been waiting at the wheel. After the lieutenant had given her address to the driver, Dell asked the question, "Jim Barlow?"

Keeley hesitated. "He's been—hurt," he said finally. "I don't know how badly, and I don't know the details. Let it go until morning. We'll see then. How come he wasn't with you?"

She told him about the call from Peters. Then she repeated her earlier apology. "I'm sorry to have taken you away from your home. You *were* home? I didn't—"

He interrupted, "Doesn't matter. My home is an empty, very depressing apartment."

She had not given any real thought to his home. "I wasn't asking—"

"I know that. But there's no reason I should have the advantage." He smiled at her. "I was married, too. My wife died, too. Seven months after we married. Polio."

What should one say? What did people say to her, to the widow of Max Kenlon? She couldn't remember. "I'm sorry," she murmured.

"Well, it was all so long ago. Ten years. Nothing really left." He

paused. Then he said in a different tone, "That's it, isn't it? Nothing left. Just emptiness. Like the apartment."

When they reached the house he said, "Carpenter." The young man beside the driver turned around. "Mrs. Kenlon, this is Sergeant Carpenter. He's going to be one of the watchers at your house tomorrow. There'll be other men tonight. You can trust the sergeant if you need help."

Carpenter ducked his head in a little bow.

Keeley insisted on riding up in the elevator with her and waiting until she had unlocked the door. Then he stood on the threshold, hat in hand, and delivered a little speech.

"Please don't feel embarrassed. I realize that you might feel that way, but your fright is entirely understandable. I'd even go a step further: since you didn't know who Carpenter was it would have been foolish of you to have walked out into the night with him. You behaved exactly as you should have. Also, perhaps you had better call a doctor. You see, you are suffering from shock. Very understandable."

He examined the last word, seemed to remember that he had said it before, and suddenly got red. Over the word? Dell wondered. Over his kindness?

He said, "Good night," abruptly, and stepped into the waiting elevator. As the door sighed to its automatic close Dell had a final glimpse of his face. It was tired, concerned, and very, very familiar.

Dell watched the elevator until it was out of sight.

Daylight had its usual effect. The sun was bright; the day was warm; spring was in the air.

Dell felt more embarrassed in the light of day than she had the night before. Then she had been numb; now she felt that she had behaved dramatically and foolishly. The lieutenant's words were remembered balm. Of course, she had been frightened but, her mind argued back, not for very good reasons.

Poor Barlow had been run over, or he had fallen down and sprained his ankle, or he had had a heart attack, or something more or less dramatic had happened to him. There was no reason to relate all the events of the universe to herself; she would stop doing so immediately. And she certainly couldn't panic for the rest of her life at the sight of every man who wore a gray topcoat.

At ten o'clock an unfamiliar voice came over her phone. He was

Officer Johnson, he informed her, and he was calling at Lieutenant Keeley's request. The lieutenant was at the hospital with Mr. Barlow, but he would call Mrs. Kenlon as soon as possible, probably early in the afternoon.

"What hospital? May I go to see Mr. Barlow?"

"I don't know what hospital, ma'am," Officer Johnson said woodenly. "I don't think he can have visitors."

The second comment belied the first. Dell decided Johnson was probably under orders. Still, she tried again. "What happened to Mr. Barlow? How was he hurt?"

"I don't know that, ma'am. The lieutenant will call you as soon as he can."

There was nothing she could do about it. She said, "Thanks," and hung up.

But her morning's first confidence had evaporated. The day might be light and bright, but uneasiness sat heavily and darkly within the apartment. She cleaned the rooms; she called her mother, her office, and her neglected friends, fibbing to all of them.

At three o'clock she had taken to pacing up and down. When she caught herself at it she stopped and went to the phone. When she was told that Lieutenant Keeley couldn't be reached she asked for Officer Johnson.

He came quickly to the telephone and said, "Oh, yes, ma'am, I was trying to get you on another wire. The lieutenant is on his way here, to the station house. He telephoned a minute ago and gave me a message for you—"

She interrupted. "I'm coming down there."

There was a pause. Then he said dubiously, "Well, I guess that'll be all right, but he said to tell you to stick close to Carpenter."

After she had her hat and coat on Dell hesitated for a minute. In spite of her determination to rise above fear she found herself unable to leave the apartment thrown wide to sun and air. Feeling cowardly, she nevertheless went from window to window, closing each one and pulling the draw cords that controlled the long heavy drapes.

Through a rear window she saw one of her watchdogs, sitting on an uncomfortable bench and looking out of place in topcoat and hat among the young green of the garden shrubbery. The minute he glimpsed a movement at her window he looked up attentively.

It made her feel safer. She smiled down at him and thought he smiled back. It was too far to see distinctly.

Carpenter was a few steps down the street, no longer a shadowy figure to Dell, but a personality. As he came over to her she said, "I'm going down to headquarters."

"All right. I'll call a cab. You won't mind if I ride with you?"

"Not at all. The lieutenant said—"

"I know. I just called in from a booth in a lobby across the street. I can see your front door from there. I got the same message." He smiled. He had a pleasant face, Dell decided, and felt a return of embarrassment.

But Carpenter gave her no chance for embarrassment during the ride. To her question as to whether he had had a boring day he said no, "I've had a parade of astonished men on my hands. You see, our description of the—the suspect is so general. 'Nice-looking' is about the most definite word we've got to go on. Who am I to say who's nice-looking? So every man under sixty and over five feet three who entered your building has had to identify himself. One vacuum-cleaner salesman decided he'd rather skip the house than be searched, and when I insisted on searching him anyway, I found out why. He had the most—uh—peculiar pictures on him. And one resident who's been away and so didn't get a going-over yesterday threatened to call Washington. I even stopped a tall strapping young woman. When she got the drift of my questions I thought she was going to sock me.

"Incidentally, I think you ought to have an inside bolt put on your apartment door. I looked at it yesterday, and it has the flimsiest lock I've ever seen. Anyone could open it with a toothpick."

At headquarters Carpenter guided her through a corridor between linked cubbyholes to a door. Keeley was inside. He said, "Thanks, Carpenter," in dismissal, and "Hello, Mrs. Kenlon." The door shut and they were alone in the small office.

The lieutenant looked tired. Dell wondered if police lieutenants always looked tired. Did they all work so hard? Did they all take their cases so much to heart?

At the sight of her his face changed subtly. It was still tired-looking, but it took on an overlay of peace. He said, "You look fine. Sit down."

"Thank you. And tell me, please, about Jim Barlow. How is he? May I see him? What happened to him?"

Keeley's brief moment of peace seemed to have been destroyed.

"Yes," he said. "Barlow." He got out of his chair and went over to a wall where he examined a framed document of some kind. Then he turned around and said flatly, "Barlow's dead."

Dell sat still in the uncomfortable golden-oak armchair and stared at him. His face looked tortured.

"Mrs. Kenlon, I don't want to hurt you. I don't know how much that information hurts you—"

She said woodenly, "It hurts me to know a nice young man has died. It hurts me to think that I was responsible, no matter how little I could help it. And selfishly it hurts and frightens me to know that death is all around me and I can do nothing to stop it. But I'm not—I wasn't—I'm just sorry."

He said, "I see." And she knew he did see. He examined the framed paper again, and when he turned around his face had reverted to normal—little actual expression, but with an underlying kindness.

"What did he die of?" Dell asked.

He came back and sat in his chair. "There's both a simple answer to that question and a very complex one. He was mugged—you understand that. Grasped around the neck from the rear and choked." Dell nodded. "And he was shot. He died of the shot, which grazed his heart. That's the simple explanation. But there's much more to it than that. He died because he was in some way implicated in"—he gestured, looking for a word—"the whole business."

"You mean with the Orcutts?"

"No. I mean in the shooting of Mathias and the things that led up to it and to the attack on you."

"But isn't it the same thing?"

Keeley sat back in his chair and spoke slowly. "No. I guess it isn't. I'm beginning to understand it, but there's so much... I think Barlow was shot because he wanted to protect you."

"But you just said—"

"I don't think he wanted to protect you until he met you. I think, until then, it was decided, either by Barlow or with his consent, that you must be put out of the way. Then he fell in love with you, or came as near it as one can in such a short time. Dying, he had only one thought—to protect you. He didn't say more than half a dozen words, and half of those were 'Dell.'

"You see, although he died of a bullet that entered his back on the right and came out of the left breast, the mugging made it al-

most impossible for him to speak. The first time he was conscious he managed to say 'Dell.' The second time, when he said it again, I realized it was a question, and I assured him you were all right. When he understood that he said, 'Paroles. Racket.' The last time he was conscious it took him several minutes to manage his words. First he said, 'Protect Dell.' It seemed to cost him agony to get out the next word, but he finally managed 'Cops.' Or," Keeley said slowly, "it might have been 'Cop.' "

It made no sense to her. She said, "But there's nothing in those few words to implicate him."

"Not necessarily, no. But those few words tie in with some ideas I've been developing in the past twenty-four hours. That's what I was fumbling toward when I discussed your pictures with you."

He leaned forward earnestly. "By yesterday, Mrs. Kenlon, the whole Orcutt setup had begun to seem—foolish to me. Too clear-cut. Too melodramatic. And there were some very peculiar little points. For instance, why should William Orcutt want to kill you when all he had to do was go to Kalamazoo, the Fiji Islands, Hoboken—any place? It's true that I suggested he might want to—to remove you as a possible witness. But when the attempt was made I was astonished, because by that time I had realized that Orcutt would have beat it, and fast. And getting out of reach wouldn't have been difficult; we had no pictures to circulate. So why hang around, go looking for you, invite danger?

"Well, if he were unbalanced he might do just that. But no Orcutt has ever been found committably insane. Criminal, but not crazy. The only conceivable reason we had to think he might be crazy was his comments about 'revenge.' And that, while not strong enough to suggest insanity, did suggest something else to me. Those letters saying, 'Mathias will die. Revenge will be had,' were so—fortuitous. The minute Mathias was killed, our suspect was ready-made."

Keeley went on, slowly, "Now, there's nothing wrong with an open-and-shut case. Despite the detective stories, murder is usually open and shut. Someone is killed; there is a logical suspect; we pick him up and he confesses, or we can prove his guilt beyond a jury's doubt. But when, on rare occasions, a murder is bizarre and requires real solving, then it's a mass of facts, suspicions, and contradictions. And yet here we have a real fancy one—a tribal feud, a vendetta, and murder for revenge—and it's all neat and prepared for us. Very strange.

"So then I fell back on a little trick of mine that I use every time I get a case that doesn't seem right." He paused for a minute, turned a light shade of pink, and added, "Keep it a secret, if you don't mind, because it sounds as if I'm simple-minded. But it often works. I just ask myself what circumstance strikes me as being *unrelatedly* odd. When people deliberately set about outwitting the authorities they take great care of the related points; it's the things they don't think matter you have to watch for. And a remote oddity came to me: Barlow's presence."

Dell said, "But Barlow wasn't there."

"No. But he was here."

Dell stared at him. "I don't understand."

"Well, you see, Barlow was rarely here at headquarters, because he was primarily a rehash writer. Sunday-supplement stuff. 'Was Justice Done?' That kind of thing. He sometimes went out on news breaks, but I don't think I had ever seen him lounging around the press room before. Ever. So it was a point—that irrelevant, odd point—and I went to work on it."

"I just don't see how."

"Well, George Orcutt and I went through the file of Barlow's articles. It's a file we police keep handy because"—Keeley's full lips drew into a straight line—"because it's such a thorn in our side. Or knife in our back. About three years ago Barlow dropped the question-mark part of his titles. Instead of asking *if*, he started saying that justice *wasn't* done. He—"

The door opened and a man stuck his head in. He saw Dell, said, "Sorry," and withdrew. But before the door had shut, Keeley called out, "Come in, George."

Orcutt came in with obvious reluctance. He gave Dell a curt nod.

Keeley said, "I was about to outline our conclusions in regard to the Barlow clippings for Mrs. Kenlon. You tell her."

Orcutt wasted no time. He stood massively just inside the door and put up his stubby right hand. He ticked off the points on his fingers. "One: Three years ago he stopped dealing with crimes of passion—amateur crimes—and took up the cudgels for professionals, usually established criminals.

"Two: Every single professional he wrote about was in the same prison. Just one prison.

"Three: In each case he displayed knowledge that we, the police, thought only we had.

"Four: He very often presented new evidence—facts we hadn't known about that, when we checked on them, turned out to be true—or else had been invented since the crime was committed.

"Five: All these prisoners were released on parole very soon after his articles ran. That's it. Excuse me, Keeley—Mrs. Kenlon."

He backed out. He was not, Dell thought, very happy in her presence.

Keeley said to Dell, "Well, that's almost it. There are a few other things: the articles were well done and very persuasive, but although we couldn't prove it, their premise—that an innocent man had been railroaded—was always false. And Sedgley Mathias had been in that particular prison." He lapsed into a contemplative silence.

Dell said, "I'm sorry, Lieutenant, but I don't understand. I suppose all these things, put together. . . . But I don't know how to put them together."

"Of course you don't. Even I—and I'm trained to the job—couldn't do it immediately. But I did begin to get an inkling. And then the manner of Barlow's death, and the fact itself, helped put the pieces together for me.

"First of all, Pete Peters had not telephoned Barlow in the restaurant. Peters was at his home in Brooklyn in the middle of a family party. Besides, the term 'open book' might have been coined to describe Peters' life. So Jim Barlow lied to you. But Barlow did go to meet *someone* in the garageway down the block. Now, if that person wanted to kill him, why not just shoot him? Why grab him and hold on until Barlow was almost choked to death? I think the attacker was trying to get Barlow to agree to something, to force him into it. When Barlow wouldn't give in he shot him.

"Furthermore, Mrs. Kenlon"—Keeley looked very earnest—"I think the point at issue was you—your life or death. An attempt had been made on your life. Barlow had on him the picture of you he told us he had destroyed, the picture Peters took. Barlow had you out to dinner. You—your presence, your picture, your existence—seemed to be the prime consideration. I think Barlow died to protect you."

"Jim Barlow," Dell thought. "A nice young man, or a conniver at murder? Should I feel grateful to him for protecting me, for dying for me? Or should I try to believe that he somehow put me in a position where I needed that drastic kind of protection?"

Either conclusion was in the realm of fantasy. She could only feel uncomplicatedly sorry for Barlow. To her he had been a nice young man, simply that. But—

"Why me?" she asked desperately. "What can I possibly have to do with all this?"

"That's the key question, of course." Keeley looked thoughtful. "It seems to me the answer must be the opposite of the reasons that William Orcutt wouldn't have wanted to harm you." He smiled and the wrinkles showed around his eyes. "That's rather confused, isn't it? Well, look: Orcutt could have got out of town. I think this man couldn't. Barlow said, 'Cop.' Since he was trying to protect you I don't know why he didn't give me a name; maybe there was a reason. But if it's a cop, perhaps it's someone you might easily recognize. And you are the eyewitness."

"I think Barlow originally held onto that picture of you because the idea was to hire a gunman. Use the picture as identification. Then Barlow refused to go ahead with the plan. He probably didn't destroy the picture because of—well, sentiment. When he wouldn't go through with the hired-killer idea I think the other man decided to take matters in his own hands—that he had to. And he had to get Barlow out of the way first."

"But why? Why?" Dell realized she was hitting the desk softly with her fist. She stopped, looked confused, and added, with an effort at composure, "If it isn't the Orcutts, who is it? What's behind it?"

"Barlow told us that: a parole racket. Barlow and his gang were engineering paroles. Mathias must have learned about it in prison and tried blackmail when he got out. That's the only way it seems to fit. Then it follows that the 'revenge' letters were deliberate. Barlow was probably the brains of the racket, and his articles—very clever, persuasive articles—were a new use for publicity. They manufactured evidence; Barlow 'uncovered' it; then the parole board had to release a prisoner. The point is that whoever shot Mathias couldn't simply get out of sight as Orcutt would have done. He had to stay here—so an eyewitness is an active threat to him."

Dell whispered, "I'm still being hunted, then?"

"Mrs. Kenlon, I'm so sorry." He got out of his chair and went around the desk. He stopped a foot from Dell's chair. "Yes." His voice was very close, but her head was lowered and she couldn't see his face. The knuckles on his square hand were white.

"Yes," he repeated, "you're in danger. But it's limited now, don't you see?" There was a pleading note in his voice. "Now that we know what to look for we'll clear it up very fast. We'll check Mathias' associates, and Barlow's. We'll crack down on some of the men who got out on parole. It will be fast, I promise, Mrs. Kenlon. But meanwhile I don't want your nerves to give way. Stay at home. Stick to the policeman assigned to you if you must go out. I'll do anything—everything to keep you safe."

Dell raised her head, stared at Keeley's suit buttons for a minute, and then rose and looked up at him. Her features were in careful control. "All right, Lieutenant," she said. "I'll hold onto my nerves." She gave him a brief smile. "But it's more than nerves, you know. This—this business has robbed me of myself, of my personality. I've become, even to myself, just a symbol of fear—the eyewitness. I want to go to work, to see friends, to go shopping, to *be* someone again."

He made a little gesture of helplessness, almost of pain, and she repeated, "All right. I'll go home now."

"Just a minute." He went to the window. "Yes. Carpenter is waiting in front." He turned around. "Take care, Mrs. Kenlon." It was more than an instruction; it was an urgent plea.

She said, "I will. Goodbye." Then she hesitated. She had a desire to comfort him. "I guess—I guess things *are* more hopeful, aren't they?"

She was aware that he stood in the doorway watching her until she came to a turn in the corridor and walked out of his sight.

Outside, the sun was dying. It might seem springlike, but it was, after all, early in the year. She looked around for Carpenter and found him across the street, standing on the edge of the curb. In his right hand was a shining something that caught the angled rays of the afternoon sun. A cigarette lighter, she thought vaguely, because he held a cigarette between the fingers of the hand that held the gleaming metal, and a wisp of smoke curled away from him. The sun was slanting from his left, cutting across his hat brim and shading the upper part of his face. But she could see the lower part of his pleasant face.

She stood motionless, frozen to the sidewalk. Then his head moved slightly and, although she still could not see his eyes, she knew he was looking at her. For the second time, as in *The Jade Garden*, they stared at each other across an empty little distance. No, Dell corrected herself suddenly—for the *third* time.

The vacuum between them was abruptly broken by a cruising taxi. Dell flung up her hand and, when the driver obeyed the signal, stumbled into the cab. "Go ahead," she said urgently. "Just straight ahead!"

At the corner she looked back. No car was behind them and she couldn't see Carpenter.

She gave the taxi driver her home address and said, "Quickly, please!" Then she sat back and fought numbness. This was wrong, she thought. She should go back to the police station. But home was Max and steel doors and familiarity. Home was safety and silence and snugness... But Max was dead, and buried on a Pacific atoll. It was time to think of the present. Only she *couldn't* think.

The cab had been going in the wrong direction and now it lost time threading through one-way streets, but the driver, once he got in the clear, began to make good time. Dell scrambled out of the cab at her door, hurried through the little lobby, and mentally pushed the elevator as it creaked slowly upward. When she reached the fourth floor she could hear her telephone ringing. Her stiff, uncooperative fingers seemed to take an interminable time with the key. When she got the door open she rushed through the hall without turning on the light.

The apartment was pitch-dark. She remembered, then, that she had drawn all the drapes. But she didn't waste time going back to turn on the light, she knew every board in the floor. She reached the bedroom quickly and sat on the side of the bed. As she lifted the receiver she turned on the bedside lamp.

It was not Keeley on the telephone. That hope, she now realized, was what made her so anxious to reach the phone. She didn't hear the man's first words, but the voice associated itself in her mind with unpleasantness.

"Mrs. Kenlon! Did you understand me?"

It was the unmelodious voice of Lieutenant Orcutt. "No," she mumbled. "No."

"I'm trying to tell you that Lieutenant Keeley is on his way over. He asked me to tell you." Orcutt had seen her only in terror-ridden extremity; he probably thought her unresponsiveness merely normal stupidity. She struggled for words, but he was going on, "Keeley said to tell you that he'll be there in a few minutes. If anything happens just stall. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she said. "Thank you." Then understanding came over "Yes!... Hello?"

But he had gone.

She hung up slowly. She pulled off her hat and put it beside her on top of the purse and gloves she had flung on the bed. The lieutenant was coming. She would be all right. She stood up and turned—and there was Carpenter.

Dell screamed. The scream came without her volition, and she said quickly into its echo, "I didn't mean to do that. I didn't mean to scream. You startled me."

He said, "Did I? Who was that on the phone?"

She struggled for composure. She carefully patted her hair into place as she answered, "That was my mother. She wants me to come to dinner. I said I would." Wasn't that all she had said on the phone? Just "Yes. Thank you"? She hoped so. Stall. Orcutt said she was to stall.

Carpenter leaned against the door frame. He looked just like—Carpenter. A pleasant-looking young man in a gray suit. His hat was on the back of his head and she could see his whole face. It was all of a part now; she could add to the description that his eyes were green.

"I was going to make some coffee," she said brightly. Too brightly, she told herself. Try to act natural; try to be the Dell of before. But she couldn't stop the false brightness; she rushed on: "Would you like some coffee?"

He stood still in the doorway, staring at her as he had done before, that Sunday morning. The problem, then, had been whether or not to kill the eyewitness. And the problem had not changed.

"Mrs. Kenlon," he asked, "aren't you interested—aren't you curious about how I got in here? Or why?"

He was perfectly sane, Dell thought. He should have looked wild, but he merely looked uncertain. She would have feed that uncertainty, make it grow in the right direction. She said, "Why, I presume it was because of the lock. Remember, you told me the lock was too flimsy? You're going to fix it, aren't you?"

He stared unwinkingly at her for a minute. Then he said slowly, "In the dark? It's no good. I'm sorry, but it's just no good. I knew you'd recognize me. I told Jim Barlow you would."

She had to ask, "Then why didn't you stay a shadow? Why did you let me see your face, at the restaurant, and after?"

He told her, "It was my job as your shadow to get you home when Barlow didn't come back. Besides, Keeley had told me how vague your impressions were—"

They both heard the elevator come to a stop. Its door creaked open and then the heavy, rushing steps were as loud as if they were in the room with them.

Carpenter said in a low dispassionate voice, "That wasn't your mother on the phone." There was a gun in his hand.

The doorbell rang.

Dell whispered, "What good will it do you now? Lieutenant Keeley will hear the shot. So what good will it do you?"

"By the time he gets in, after the shot, I'll be out the back door. I sent Dempsey around front. I told him—I haven't time to explain, but I've got it worked out. Barlow wasn't the only one who could plan things. I can, too."

He still looked sane. He also looked forthright, determined. He had solved his problem. The gun moved upward.

Without hesitation, faster than a clock's tick, Dell's right hand swept outward. The night-table lamp crashed to the floor, and they were in pitch-darkness. With the crash Dell leaped.

It would seem that she had no time for thought, but all life can be planned during the taking of a single breath. And Dell planned to save her life. Logically, Carpenter would expect her to move, and, logically, she could move in only one direction, toward her right. The wall was behind her, the bed on her left, and Carpenter in front of her.

So Dell did the unexpected: she moved to her left. As she scrambled across the big bed the gun exploded with a roar. And at almost the same time there was another shot: Keeley was shooting away the flimsy lock of the apartment door.

Dell stood motionless on the far side of the room, in the corner beside the heavy drapes that covered the window. Should she sit down on the floor? No. Although she would present a lesser target sitting, if it became necessary to move she would have sacrificed easy mobility. This was *her* house, she thought. She knew every inch of it. She could follow Carpenter's blundering movements as clearly as if the overhead lights were blazing. He'd never find that switch he was fumbling for; it was on the wrong side of the door, behind the door. She'd always meant to have it moved.

Keeley's voice was no louder than conversational pitch; it didn't need to be since he was in the inner hall, only a few feet from them. The darkness, Dell realized, was defeating him, too. He said, "Don't be a fool, Carpenter. I know who you are; so what have you got to gain?"

Dell opened her mouth, then shut it tight. "I've never been a genius," she thought, "but I haven't been a dummy, either. If I say a word, I give my position away. For once the lieutenant is not going to think I'm—" She left the thought there.

Carpenter was coming toward her. He made no sound, or if he did it was covered by the sounds of the lieutenant who had just run into the bedroom doorjamb. But Carpenter was there, right in front of her, fumbling with the drapes.

She reached out her right hand and very carefully felt for the mate of the lamp that she had swept off the far bedside table. When she had a firm grasp of its neck she bent slowly and reached out into the darkness with her left hand. She touched a bit of rough cloth, and then she heard a smothered gasp.

"Who's the hunter now?" she thought fiercely, as she swept her left arm around Carpenter's knees and threw her weight forward. He fell to the floor with a deafening crash and as he hit, Dell stretched far forward, toward his head, and swung the small but heavy lamp base down. She didn't reach his head, but she caught him full on the back of his neck.

Then she stood up.

Keeley said wildly, "Dell! Carpenter! Where—?"

"The light switch is behind the door, Lieutenant." Her voice was, she thought with pride, very cool, very self-possessed.

He flicked the switch and then stood still, his arms at his sides, the big gun dangling uselessly. Carpenter lay at full length, his head pillow'd in the crook of his right arm, pieces of alabaster strewn across his shoulders and in his hair. Dell was standing on the far side of him, outlined by the heavy drapes. Her hair was in perfect order. She looked charming.

Three men rushed through the outer doorway and scrambled into the bedroom. Two came over and knelt beside Carpenter. The room, filled with light, came alive with their energy and motion. Only she and Lieutenant Keeley were motionless.

Finally he said, "I thought . . . I heard the shot. You didn't say anything."

"I would have given my position away," she chided gently.

"Yes," he said, "of course."

"I was tired of being a dummy," she explained. "Tired of being a—symbol of fear. I wanted you to know—" She took a step toward him and her knees buckled.

Keeley moved quickly and caught her. "I understand," he said.

"But I always understood. You see, I am still frightened. I thought you were... Come."

He guided her toward the door. Over his shoulder he said, "You'll take over, Stein?" A man said, "Sure, Lieutenant."

It was comparatively quiet in the living room. Keeley led her to the couch and then sat on the marble coffee table, facing her.

Dell held herself erect. "I'm all right now," she said. "How did you happen to come?"

"I was watching you through the window. I had just told you to stick to Carpenter, but instead you stared at him and then jumped into a cab alone. You had been so good; *not* a dummy." He smiled. "Your cab was going the wrong way, and Carpenter got one going in the right direction."

That was why the street had been empty, Dell thought.

"So I was afraid he would get here first. I yelled to Orcutt to call you and to send Stein, and then I tore out. And while I ran I realized that it had all been laid out for me last night."

"Laid out?"

"Well, who else knew where you and Barlow were having dinner? Someone else could have followed, but there's no doubt that Carpenter was there. And in his report on the evening he stated that he hadn't heard a shot. The restaurant's entrance wasn't fifty yards from the garageway, but Carpenter said he hadn't heard a thing. It was a stroke of luck for him that he was assigned to guard you, but he'd have found another way. He tried, once, from your garden. Carpenter was the 'cop' Barlow died struggling to identify. And—" Keeley paused and looked past her at the wall.

"What?"

"Well, I wonder if he wasn't saying 'Carp—'?"

Poor Barlow. But... "It's all over, isn't it?" Dell asked. "I can go to work. I can explain to my mother. I can stop being afraid—by myself?" She gestured toward the bedroom. "They'll take him away soon?"

"Yes," he said gently. "Any minute."

"I'll have to move out of the apartment anyway. It's spoiled for me."

"That's too bad." The lieutenant sounded concerned. "It's a beautiful apartment. Perhaps we—perhaps you can redecorate it a little." His face had resumed its gentle glow.

Dell contemplated his deepening color. Then she said reflectively, "Yes. Perhaps we can."

Robert L. Fish

In a Country Churchyard

Robert L. Fish has many strings to his criminous bow. Readers of Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine are apt to think of him almost exclusively as the creator of Schlock Homes, as a penning, punning parodist, with a chuckle and sometimes a guffaw in every other paragraph. But Mr. Fish has his serious side—one might even say, his gloomy side. Here is the brightly glimmering Fish in late-Victorian England, but offering us a totally different kind of "period piece"—about murder and conscience, evil and dread...

"The Curfew tolls the knell of parting day" and "The paths of glory lead but to"—you know whither...

It was on the return trip from the churchyard cemetery that Martin Blackburn felt the first indication of nervousness. As husband of the deceased he rode in the carriage immediately behind the now-empty hearse, and as he sat rigidly on the edge of the seat and stared out of the streaked window at the bleak Northumberland sky, a tremor swept through his body.

He was a tall, gaunt man in his early forties. The taut skin that stretched over the sharpboned face gave him a skeletal appearance, and the long, thin fingers of his large hands enhanced this imagery. His forehead was high and slightly bulging, and his small ears lay flat against his head, completing the picture of a drawn skull. Only his eyes, sharp and piercing, gave a touch of animation to his face. The black of his costume was quite usual for him, and the occasion had required no change in his normal Sunday attire beyond a funeral band sewn about the sleeve of his greatcoat. All the neighbours and the few families working on his farm had always stood in awe of his aloof figure, for by nature he was neither friendly nor communicative. Now, alone in the dim, heaving carriage he braced himself against the hard seat and relived the past month...

It had actually been surprisingly easy. Loretta's illness had been quite natural in its inception; in fact, it was not until she had been forced to remain in bed for a second week that the possibility of actively arranging her death had even occurred to him. Of course, the idea of her dying and the idea of his subsequently inheriting the large farm and her larger personal income had, on occasion, presented itself to him; for his unattractive and shrewish wife had never relinquished her control over the dowry she had brought to their barren marriage.

But the thought of murder to accomplish these desired ends had only suggested itself since the second week. Then all the details had sprung to mind with such remarkable clarity that he could almost convince himself he was simply an instrument, an agent, directed by forces beyond himself, for Loretta's deserved removal from this vale of life.

He had never been affectionate, either during courting days or after marriage, and he did not make the mistake of changing his ways once his plans were completed. The doctor, for one thing, was far from a fool; nor was Mrs. Crimmins, their housekeeper. He continued to visit his wife's room with the same regularity—as well as the same air of distaste—and to ask the same questions of her, the housekeeper, and the doctor.

His routine for handling the farm was rigorously maintained, and by every carefully calculated action he appeared to be the same man, irritated as he would naturally be by the inconvenience of illness in the house, but expecting that sooner or later his wife would get up from the sickbed and resume responsibilities.

But behind this facade of normality the details of the murder were being carefully decided upon. Loretta Blackburn had never been too strong; her heart, while not sufficiently weak to cause either herself or her doctor any immediate anxiety, had still required constant medication. Her illness had begun as a simple catarrh and had been aggravated by the damp weather and the poor location of the fireplaces their farmhouse afforded. Her doctor had warned Blackburn of the danger of lung fever and the attendant possibility of a further weakening of her heart; but Blackburn had no intention of depending upon a kindly Fate to resolve his problem.

A small kettle lit by an alcohol-spirit lamp stood by the patient's bed-side, and each evening Loretta propped herself up complainingly upon the pillows of the great four-poster and in-

haled the fumes of a benzoine preparation to clear her head. The murder plan reduced itself to the utmost simplicity: to add to the benzoine solution a small quantity of sulphuric acid and the tiniest of cyanide pellets, and to allow the fumes of this potent concoction to kill his wife.

The mechanics of administration were given particular consideration, for Martin Blackburn had no wish inadvertently to join his wife in death. The odor would, he was sure, be disguised by the sharp aroma of the benzoine itself in a strengthened solution, and a thorough airing of the room would strengthen the appearance of innocent surroundings.

And it had all worked perfectly. He began by taking over the housekeeper's daily task of preparing the benzoine solution. It was done subtly, grudgingly, on the basis that Mrs. Crimmins was using the task as an excuse for shirking her other duties, and the housekeeper was pleased to be relieved of any duty, since the illness of Mrs. Blackburn had thrown the entire burden of the household upon her.

On the evening of the fourth day after Blackburn had assumed the extra sickroom responsibility, he deemed the time ripe, for the crisis had passed and his wife was showing signs of improvement, and the regular visit of the doctor fell on the following day. To the usual preparation he added the acid, and at the last moment slipped in the tiny pellet. Holding his breath tightly, he pressed the cone to his wife's thin and unattractive face. The response to the gas was almost immediate; still holding his breath, he swiftly flung the contents of the flask into the darkness beyond the open window, leaning out into the brisk breeze that swept past.

When his aching lungs could no longer stand the pain of their confinement, he cautiously allowed a breath of night air to filter into his lungs, and then stood inhaling for several minutes. He then softly closed the window, added a scuttle of coals to the fire to remove the unusual chill, returned to the bed-side, and rapidly prepared a harmless solution.

His fear of detection was slight; the odor was almost indistinguishable, and throughout he had heard the constant rattling of dishes as Mrs. Crimmins finished her work in the kitchen below. Steadying himself against one of the bed-posts, he called to the housekeeper, his voice tinged with an edge of panic that was far from pretence.

And that had been all. The hastily-summoned doctor may have

been a bit puzzled by the suddenness of death, but if so, his wonder did not extend to any suspicious questions. The death-certificate had been duly signed, with heart-seizure given as the immediate cause. Blackburn had been careful to avoid the error of being too obviously overcome with grief; the relationship between his wife and himself had never been anything but poorly-disguised enmity, and that fact was known to everyone in the village. Sad, sober in his mourning, he had made the necessary arrangements for burial in the country churchyard and carried them through.

His crowning stroke was to hide both the bottle of acid and the box of cyanide pellets beneath the cerements in those moments he had requested to be alone with his wife before the coffin-lid was screwed down...

Yes, it had been so easy! He felt the tremor return and gripped his knee with his free hand, fighting down a momentary panic that he knew was truly unfounded. There could be no questions; there had been no slips. A laugh of successful attainment welled within him, replacing the panic; a wide grin, part relief and part hysteria, twisted his lips. And at that moment the wrinkled face of one of the walking mourners bobbed up beside the carriage window, peering curiously in at him.

The horrible smile froze on his lips. Idiot! he cried to himself, recoiling into the deeper shadows of the rocking vehicle. Fool, fool! Control yourself! To be observed laughing at a time like this!

A lurch of the carriage and the hobbling figure had disappeared into the gloom behind. The dark moor swayed past as he slowly regained control, but he was certain there must already be whispering groups in the rutted road behind, marking and discussing his idiotic grin...

In the days that followed, Martin Blackburn watched anxiously for any sign that his suspicious demeanor on the day of the funeral had become public knowledge, but to all appearances it had passed unnoticed. At least, those with whom he came into contact never seemed to reveal by word or deed that they had heard of the incident, or, having heard of it, had put any suspicious interpretation upon it. He gave himself over to the running of the farm, his inner turmoil assuaged.

The question of getting in touch with the solicitors who handled his wife's estate was one to which he gave careful thought. There

was a certain correct timing necessary, for he felt that to be either too precipitous or too hesitant might be equally damaging. He had finally decided that an inspection of his wife's papers would be of aid in properly assessing the matter, when he received his second shock.

He had gone to her bedroom for the papers he knew his wife had kept in an old wooden trunk-case bound with leather straps. After closing the door of the room, he pulled the trunk from the closet and kneeling beside it, threw back the lid. Atop the pile of papers lay some old daguerreotypes of his wife and members of her family, shiny, stiff relics now turned purplish-brown with age.

He was removing these to rummage underneath when he heard the door open and felt, rather than saw, the cold eye of the house-keeper upon him. The dread panic he had suppressed rose within him again. Too early, you fool! he thought, almost snarling in his self-disgust. You appear too anxious!

He turned his head, afraid to meet the suspicion in her eyes, and spoke dully. "Yes, Mrs. Crimmins? You wanted something?"

Even the slight hesitation in her reply was accusative.

"The roses," she finally said, and he could hear the sarcasm behind the innocent words, "the ones outside her window—this window. They're all brown and burned, like. I thought you might want to—" She stopped.

The roses! Of course—the acid he had thrown out the window! He fought down the gush of fear, his anger at himself suddenly shifted to this implacable nemesis above him, watching him coldly, silently taunting him. His voice lost control.

"Get out! At once, do you hear? Leave the house! Go to the village; anything, anywhere, but get out!" And then he added with quiet hatred: "You will never disturb me when I am in this room!"

He slumped there with head bent, like a gyved body awaiting the executioner's axe, and heard the door close and a few moments later, the creak of the outside gate. For one wonderful moment he felt a sudden peace at the silence, at being alone, at the feeling of motionlessness that possessed him.

But his flare of temper had been foolhardy, and he knew it. He had come to consider himself two people: the careful, clever, watchful man who had carried out the audacious plan of murder with no oversights; and a blind, raving fool seemingly intent upon destroying everything with the ill-advised and reckless actions of

a maniac. Now, still kneeling in the quiet room beside the empty four-poster, he clenched and unclenched his trembling fingers and in a steady, maddening monotone cursed all his enemies, but particularly the most dangerous of all, that second Martin Blackburn inside him.

To lose his control with Mrs. Crimmins, of all people! With her steel-trap mouth, her rigid bewhiskered lips, her icy eyes! He could hear her now, bending over the cluster of attentive heads in the village, whispering her suspicions, telling of the discord between Loretta and himself, the evidence of his guilty conscience, remarking on the suddenness of her death when she obviously had been recovering...

He could hear it all, see the lifted eyebrows, the slowly nodding heads. With a sudden resurgence of fury he slammed the lid shut on the battered chest and, arising, kicked it violently against the wall. He stumbled down the stairs and sought to calm his nerves with huge gulps of brandy.

His third shock came the following day, although it was postponed until the evening. He was sitting, staring somberly into a glowing fire, when Mrs. Crimmins came in and announced with obvious satisfaction that the constable had come to see him. Behind her as she spoke, there appeared the gross figure of the village's only police-officer, but before Blackburn could leap from his chair, the constable came forward eyeing him steadily.

"Me wife was after sayin'," mumbled the constable with an implied *non sequitur* that held Blackburn bound to his chair with terror, "that a game of draughts might be what 'e gentleman was needin'." He shook his head lugubriously. "Not that I 'ave any 'opes of winnin'—at draughts, that is—but..." He allowed the words to trail off in silence.

Blackburn choked down the hysterical laugh that was inadvertently rising in his throat; it had been just such a nervous laugh that had been the first link in his chain of adversity. So it was to be cat-and-mouse, eh? The full import of the danger seemed to wipe away all fear and substitute a new watchfulness.

And with it a new decision: to-night he would take charge, and not his stupid, reckless *alter ego*. His mind seemed clear and sharp for the first time since the funeral, his fear and panic for the first time under confident control.

To an impartial observer, the game of draughts might have

served as a pleasant example of an ordinary evening's entertainment in that solid, dependable Victorian year, with the portly housekeeper stepping from the kitchen on occasion to see that the ale-mugs were well-filled and the tin of biscuits ready at hand. Although it was late spring and a full moon glanced in at the narrow recessed windows, the fire was kept burning brightly and, together with several tapers, provided the light by which the two men played.

To a less impartial observer, the scene would have blended the dramatic with the grotesque. In the flickering shadows cast by the flames, the two men presented a sharp contrast: Blackburn, thin and tense, making contemptuously swift moves and then falling back in his chair to search the face of his opponent for some key to his thoughts; the constable, bulky and stolid, his heavy fingers curled in hesitation over this chequer or that, puffing on his stubby pipe with the rhythm of breathing, his eyes fixed steadily on the board before him.

Blackburn, in a sudden, crystal clarity of perception, almost smiled. His enemies also made mistakes. The patent hollowness of the constable's excuse to visit the farm; the regularity of Mrs. Crimmins' inspection from the doorway—all a bit too obvious. They were trying to wear him down, wait him out, force his nerve to fail. The careful plotter within him studied the scene impassively, answering each move of his opponent rapidly, paying small attention to that game; but watching, watching, in the larger game.

When at last Blackburn had been defeated and the pieces laid back in their box, he felt a surge of relief, a feeling that he had withstood the preliminary assault on his nerves, and was prepared for the next attack. But the constable, muttering something about an early rising, swallowed the remainder of his ale and left soon after. Blackburn returned to his chair in suspicious doubt. Was it possible their plan was a different one? Quite obviously it was. His fears began swiftly to gather once again.

It was quite apparent that any hopes of safety that he might have cherished regarding his idiotic laugh on returning from the funeral were pure self-deception. Of course the grin had been noted; how could it have been otherwise? It was equally evident that Mrs. Crimmins had spread her tale in all directions. The visit of the constable had not been very subtle, but in truth what need did they have for subtlety?

There was, of course, one saving grace: there could be no evidence, no proof. The suspicions which his stupid actions had aroused might have convinced the police that he had murdered his wife, but if he kept his wits—and if that damned idiotic beast within him made no future slips—they could never prove anything against him. There were no traces of cyanide gas, certainly not after this length of time. And an autopsy would not—

An autopsy! Suddenly he sat upright. The bottle of acid, the box of pellets! A paralysing cold hand gripped his stomach. You fool! he cried to himself. You utter, complete, unmitigated fool! The dozens of places you might have hidden them, the hundreds of ways you might have destroyed them! To leave them where their mute testimony was bound to be fatal! All other thoughts were swept from his mind. He had to get the bottle and box from the coffin!

He arose from his chair, shaking, and called out to Mrs. Crimmins. She hurried in from the kitchen, drying her hands, eyeing him slyly. He forced himself to disregard the cynicism he saw in her eyes and to keep his voice down.

"Mrs. Crimmins," he said, steadying himself against the fireplace, "there is no need for you to remain any longer to-night. You may leave things as they are. I—I have some accounts to go over and I—I would rather not be disturbed."

He seemed to hear his own voice as from a far distance. There was something dream-like in the housekeeper's getting her wrap-around and kerchief, something unreal in watching her move to the door. The sound of her footfalls hurrying down the path seemed to come to him through a misty curtain, like distant, imagined echoes. He placed his shaking hands over his eyes, forcing his tired brain to plan.

Several brandies seemed partially to dissipate the fog in his head, and then he set to work. Wrapping a scarf about his neck, he went quickly to the stables, saddled a horse, and led the animal to the shed where the tools were kept.

Somewhere from within his hot, pounding head a cold voice seemed to direct his movements; he acted on this inner compulsion. His own emotions flickered in and out of focus, now filling him with dread, and alternately disappearing into a warm, soft lassitude.

He found himself riding furiously along the hard road to the cemetery, one hand gripping the reins, the other holding a shovel tightly across the pommel. The damp night air seemed to clear his

brain, and he saw again the terrible position he was in. Terror came with awareness as he spurred his horse even more fiercely over the rolling moor.

The churchyard cemetery appeared above a rise in the road, the ancient fence and drooping trees momentarily silhouetted against the white disk of the full moon. Blackburn threw himself from the saddle, dropping the reins to the ground, hurrying through the scattered monuments to the relatively fresh mound covering his wife's grave. Without a pause he began to dig, his heart pounding, his breath harsh in the night silence.

A sudden sound brought him to a startled standstill and he stopped, panting, to search the gloom. It was only his horse, untethered, moving away in the darkness. For an instant he contemplated going after it, but the urgency of his mission forced him to abandon the idea. With a choked curse he threw himself back into his labors, tearing at the stubborn earth, flinging the dirt from the grave with frenzied, jerking motions. The bright moon threw wavering shadows over the scene, and the rising wind whispered through the overhanging branches bent in solemn contemplation of the weird view below.

Suddenly metal grated on wood. With a savage grunt of satisfaction he redoubled his efforts, scraping the clinging clods from the coffin-lid with the edge of the shovel. The moon peered over the rim of the black pit, throwing into relief the struggling, disheveled figure, the partially uncovered coffin.

Blackburn slipped the edge of the shovel under one corner of the lid, pressing the shovel down with a strength born of desperation; with a sharp tearing sound the screws ripped free and a board came away. Bits of dried earth fell into the opening, covering the half-exposed sunken face within.

With frantic haste Blackburn dropped to his knees, slipping his fingers beneath the cerements, searching for the containers. One came to hand readily; he slid it into his pocket and continued his search.

Where could the other have gotten to? He reached further, feeling the weight of the lifeless body pressing against his fingers, the rough wood of the coffin scraping the skin. And then he had it! And at the same moment he became aware of the commotion above him.

There was a flickering of a bull's-eye lantern thrust over the edge of the grave. He heard his name being called.

"Hold on! Mr. Blackburn! None of that, now!"

No sound could make itself issue from his paralysed throat. He made one move towards the far wall of the shallow pit, stumbling over the coffin, spurning the huge arm extended in his direction. His eyes bulged in terror, searching for escape. There was none. With his mouth open in a vain attempt to scream his rage, his frustration, he tore the cover from the box in his hand and dropped a pellet down his throat...

The old crone had few opportunities to bask in public attention, and she didn't mean to let this one pass by. Her hand gripped the polished rail of the witnessbox of the coroner's inquest like a vulture's talon.

"So bin to 'is elf, 'e was," she said. "I seed 'im through the carriage winder arter the funeral. Ah, it were darkish an' me eyes mayn't be what they was, but I seed 'im clear enough. Her dyin' 'it im 'arder not he let on. It allus does," she added, picturing with dark satisfaction the future reaction of her own undemonstrative husband at her demise.

"There he was," Mrs. Crimmins told the solemn court-room. "Poor man! Going over her old tintypes, one by one. And me, like the fool I be, disturbing the poor man in his sorrow. Oh, he felt it deep, never you mind!"

"I knowed it was still botherin' the poor man," the constable said with a sad shake of his head. "'im losin' game o' draughts to the likes o' me! Then when Mrs. Crimmins comes over t'ouse sayin' she was sure 'e meant to 'arm 'isself, well, I 'ad to get young Griggs an' 't others, didn't I? And o' course we wasted time lookin' about 'is 'ouse and the barns afore we even thought of 'e cemetery." He shook his head in the ensuing silence.

"Anyway," he resumed, "if 'e 'adn't done it with one o' them pills, 'ed of jumped off a bridge, or 'ung issself. When they're grievin' deep like that, there ain't never no stoppin' them."

"Q"

William Bankier

The Road Without a Name

Abel Borwin had a nervous breakdown. When he recovered he told his doctor that he "wanted to get away from it all"—away from the ratrace of his work, away from the people who disturbed him. That suggested a vacation to quiet, peaceful Nova Scotia, to the remote, idyllic countryside . . .

A story you won't forget in a hurry—if you ever forget it at all . . .

Since Abel Borwin had no surviving family, it was his close friends who noticed that he was having another nervous breakdown. His slate-colored eyes widened gradually and began to blink less. A serious man when not under stress, he began now to tell jokes and make puns with almost every sentence he spoke and yet he never so much as smiled in the face of his friends' uncertain laughter.

Then Abel drew a large part of his savings from the bank and bought seven new suits of clothes which he mixed and matched, jackets and trousers, so that he never seemed to wear the same outfit twice. But it was after he went to the barber and had his hair cut very short, clippred all around, his big head emerging sheared in the bean-shave style his parents had enforced when he was a boy of seven—it was after this that his friends had a long talk with him and convinced him to go back and see Dr. Hildred again.

The breakdown was not serious. With medication and psychotherapy, the doctor had Abel living at home within a month, although Abel reported daily to the clinic for his sessions. These were soon reduced to twice weekly and he was encouraged to go back to work. But since his job as account executive at an advertising agency was one of constant pressures and tensions, and because he expressed a strong wish to "get away from under it all for a while," it was agreed he would take a short vacation.

The way Abel Borwin saw it, he wanted to get away from

people; but if some people were essential to his existence in the next two weeks, he wanted them to be as few as possible. That sounded, the doctor said, like Nova Scotia. So Abel began his planned withdrawal from the complicated, crowded, disturbing society that both supported him and held him prisoner.

First he took a limousine through the densely packed streets of Montreal to the ant nest of Dorval Airport. Here he escaped into the ranks of more than one hundred fatalists sardined into an Air Canada jet. Two hours later he was on a bus driving away from the spaced-out environs of Halifax. Shortly thereafter he was in the Nova Scotia border town of Amherst.

But even this idyllic place in its shade-dappled summer mood was not restful enough for Abel Borwin.

So he rented a car and drove out along narrow highways through villages of a few score contented souls and past hamlets of no more than three farms and a grocery store at an intersection; and even this isolation was not peaceful enough for the sensitive nerves of Abel Borwin.

Then he saw the house. It was only five o'clock and though the sun was still four hours from the horizon, there was no need to look further. A sign on the lawn, similar to dozens he had seen on his drive, said:

The Poplars, Guest House

Miss Elizabeth Purdy

A gravel path at least a hundred yards long was lined with stately poplar trees, past which he now drove to park in front of the massive frame house. It was three stories high, with screened porches on the first two floors and gabled windows on the third. The ornate gingerbread molding that decorated the house was in excellent repair—in fact, with its fresh coat of brilliant white paint, the house looked as though it might have been built last year. Yet its style and size, and the mature landscape in which it stood, attested to its age.

The lady who confronted Abel on the porch was another surprise. Miss Purdy was not the lace-draped old biddy that the place suggested; she was a slick tall woman with smart makeup and poodle-cut gray hair, wearing a pants suit and smoking a delicately shaped ivory pipe. She welcomed Abel with a jolly smile and a warm handshake and insisted on helping with his bags.

Inside the house antiquity was more apparent but no less elegant. The furniture was obviously old and expensive—large dark-brown pieces, lots of glass and hand carving, many bookcases, more than one grandfather clock, the flash of crystal, the gleam of silver, the smell of lemon oil and wine in the cool dim rooms.

"I was having a glass of sherry before dinner. Would you pour us both some?" She indicated the Waterford decanter and glasses.

It emerged during their conversation, discreetly but clearly, that Miss Purdy was a very rich lady indeed, thanks to an inheritance from her father who had owned ships when they meant something in Canada. And she loved to spend money and believed in maintaining her property and enjoyed her frequent trips to Boston and New York where her brokers managed her considerable investments. The guest house enterprise was merely a hobby, a way to turn up interesting company to stay with her. She never allowed more than one in the house at a time because more than one would be a chore. And the rate? Oh, anything—\$10 a week would be fine.

Abel ate almost that much at supper. Miss Purdy herself did the preparing and serving—it was such a nuisance, she said, to have servants about. Could you open this bottle of wine, Mr. Borwin, that's a man's job. There was a thick barley soup and roast beef enough for a large family, with home-fried potatoes and fresh corn and peas, and for dessert, a slab of homemade rhubarb pie. With coffee, which was dark and strong, there were glasses of Hennessy brandy, with the bottle left on the table.

Later Abel found himself propped on a sofa in the den before a color television set with a bowl of cashews on one side and a tray of mints on the other, and when Miss Purdy asked what he would like to drink and he said beer, she came to him with a frosty tankard of Carlsberg. Then she sat beside him where he could sense her warmth and inhale the fragrance of her perfume mixed with the aroma of the fine tobacco she burned in the charming little pipe, and as they laughed together at a summer replacement variety show, Abel Borwin began to feel like a happily married man basking in the attentiveness of his loving wife.

And this illusion of domesticity was heightened later when they went upstairs together and Miss Purdy lost her balance outside his bedroom door and fell against him with a little squeal of dismay, which turned to a purr as he took her in his arms and kissed her.

The next morning, feeling as though he had never been sick but willing to recuperate in this fashion forever, Abel sat across the breakfast table and nodded at Elizabeth's good advice. "So you just go ahead and enjoy a walk through the country. It's a perfect day and I've got plenty to do here."

Miss Purdy had not exaggerated the quality of the day. There was perfection in the fresh breeze that moved gigantic, flat-bottomed cumulous clouds across the blue sky, interrupting the bombardment of the sun's rays at intervals just frequent enough to temper its heat with an acceptable proportion of shade. Abel set out along the edge of the country road in the direction he would have gone had he not stopped at The Poplars. One by one he passed large farmhouses set back from the road, but none as elegant as the Purdy residence. All, however, had names posted on some sort of sign, either wrought iron or painted wood. Here was *Shady Dell*, next *The Hendersons*, followed by *Apple Hollow* and, unavoidably, *Dunwerkin*.

Thus it was that after a succession of these signs, Borwin was surprised to pass a house with no sign but instead, in tin numerals nailed to one of the white pillars of the porch, the number 17.

Seventeen was the number of Abel's apartment back in the city; this thought crossed his mind idly. Then, as he stood on the verge and stared at the house which was as large as Elizabeth's but as outstanding in its need of paint and repair as hers was elegant, Abel was struck by the inappropriateness of the number. Seventeen what? This country road had no name: It was not like 17 Elm Street in a town. And there was no Number 15 farther back on the road, or a Number 16 on the other side. Strange indeed. However.

Back at The Poplars with several miles of country road behind him and a mug of icy beer on the table before him, Abel mentioned this strangeness. "Oh, yes," Elizabeth said as she filled a bowl with pretzel sticks, "my brother Gerald lives there. He used to live here with me before I turfed him out last year. Not that I don't love my brother—God knows I do love him and I don't mind what he does, but I do insist on peace and quiet. And he'd keep bringing people in here, and then all that noise and fighting. You wouldn't believe the yelling that used to go on here! So I gave him sufficient money from my inheritance to buy that house."

"I must say, it's nothing like your place," Abel commented.

"There is no place anything like this place anywhere near this

place," Elizabeth said, lowering herself beside Abel with a rustle of silk and a wave of lavender bath powder, "so this must be the place."

Later that afternoon, when they were beginning to think again of food, there was a sound of footsteps on the porch and a hollow rattling on the frame of the screen door. Elizabeth went and stood behind the screen and Abel followed her. He saw over her shoulder a young couple clad in the gypsy garments of contemporary youth, their skin coppered from the weather, their few possessions in a blanket roll beside them.

His landlady was saying, "I'm sorry, we're full up here. Why don't you try down the road, in that direction? Number 17, a few farms down—he often takes people in."

When they were gone she said, "I really couldn't bear to have anyone here with us, could you?"

And Abel agreed. "It's perfect as it is."

Which was true of the next day even though it rained hard and a cold front passed through with high winds and a furious lashing of the poplars along the lane. Elizabeth turned these conditions to advantage, however, by having Abel build and light a fire of birch and maple in the huge living-room fireplace. They spent most of the day in front of the roaring, scented flames with a couple of bottles of champagne, roastbeef sandwiches, a deck of cards, and a giant cribbage board on legs.

Following a night of mutual comforting while the wind strafed the bedroom windows with bursts of rain, the next morning dawned calm, sunny, and warm. After a lingering breakfast Abel accepted Elizabeth's suggestion that he refresh himself with another walk.

Again he set out past the neighbouring farms and was about to pass her brother's decrepit house when something made him pause. The old house had survived the storm and yet there was something different about it. Then he saw it—the number 19. At first he wondered if he could have misread the number two days before. But, no—17 was his apartment number; he had noted that especially.

The path leading to Gerald Purdy's home was a short one and Abel now covered it quickly to stand beneath the porch and stare at the number. From this closer distance there could be no doubt; beneath the number 9 he could see traces of the outline where the 7 had been. And the metal of the 9 was fresher than that of the 1.

A footstep on the gravel startled Abel and he whirled to face Gerald Purdy. The resemblance to his sister was obvious in the broad forehead and large brown eyes. But where Elizabeth was trim of figure, the young brother was obese, overfed, self-indulged in the extreme; everything about him was fat, from his lips to the gross fingers that held a wet cigar close to his pouchy cheek.

"Admiring my house? It isn't much, I'm afraid."

"To be frank I was intrigued by this number 19. I was sure the other day it was a 17."

"Well, now, that wouldn't make much sense, would it? I suspect you're staying at my sister's down the road. She always sends her people walking down to me. Come in and have a drink out of the sun."

Stung by an unreasonable pang of jealousy at Purdy's reference to Elizabeth's other guests, Abel felt inclined to refuse; but he did not want word of his rudeness to get back to his landlady. So half an hour later he was sitting in the dusty, badly kept living room with a large whiskey in his hand and a boring tour of the old ruin behind him.

Gerald Purdy sat across the room, refilling his glass from a bottle on the floor by his chair and talking about local matters which Abel soon tuned out. Having lost the thread of the conversation, he was surprised when Purdy stood up and wrestled two mahogany lecterns into the center of the room and placed them facing each other several feet apart.

"This one is yours, old fellow," Purdy said to his now-attentive guest. "Please take your place."

"For what?"

"For the game. We always play the game. You may choose the topic." He consulted a sheet of paper on his lectern. "There are a couple that have never been used. It wouldn't be fair, of course, for me to debate a topic for the second time. Which would you like? 'Resolved That the Youth of America Prefer Slavery to Freedom,' or 'Resolved That Money Is the Root of All Happiness.' You may debate Pro or Con—take your choice."

"I'm really not very good at—"

"Come, you must. It's my one pleasure, my passion!" Purdy's vehemence convinced Abel of the futility of refusal.

"Very well. For just a few minutes."

"Good. Choose a topic."

"The first one, I think."

"Pro or Con?"

"Con."

"Fine. I shall begin so that you'll have time to collect your arguments."

Abel nodded, and recognizing the need to match his host's madness, downed his drink and poured another as Purdy began to speak.

"The youth of America certainly do prefer slavery to freedom, as I shall amply demonstrate. Oh, not the slavery of manacle and leg iron, but the tyranny of conformity to dogma and cant."

Purdy was an orator in the old style. There was a fascination in watching his movements around the lectern, in hearing the modulation of his voice, in observing the theatrical lift of his chin. When he took out his pocket watch, Abel thought this was another dramatic punctuation, but Purdy said, "Very well, your opening statement and rebuttal. Proceed."

"I can't match my worthy opponent's rhetoric, so I won't try. But I do believe he has made a number of statements that don't bear close examination. First of all, though some young Americans are undoubtedly Communist party members, it is absurd to suggest that this political doctrine motivates them all."

As Abel warmed to his subject, he began to enjoy himself—that is, until he noticed his opponent's reaction. Where the large face had been wreathed in a Jovian smile at first, now the brow was down, the eyes were small, the fat lips clamped in a furious pout. The sudden change in masks made Abel falter. "Look," he said, "if this doesn't suit you we can stop."

"Not at all. We have begun an argument and argue it out we shall." Purdy's voice was thunder in the stuffy room. "To the finish."

And now he took up an attack on Abel's opening statement with such viciousness that Abel felt his skin grow cold. Purdy compared his opponent to a voyeur who enjoyed ogling the young, extracting vicarious pleasure from their obscene behavior. He said those who searched below their own generation for heroes were emotional cripples, cases of arrested development.

Abel began frantically to look for a way out—and courtesy be damned.

"Yes, we have examples a-plenty of the long-haired hippies roaming the country with a bed roll and no marriage license, knocking on the doors of the respectable, ready to practice their

parasitic ways. They aren't ready to die for their country, but they're dying to tear it down. Well, we can accommodate them. We can and do."

Purdy's ranting reached a crescendo as he flung the lectern aside—and now Abel saw that there was a large kitchen knife in his host's hand.

Abel ducked under the first wild swing of the blade and for the next few minutes he felt like a rabbit trapped in a barn with a wild bull. He was almost out of breath and was bleeding from a cut on the back of one hand when a loose carpet saved him. Purdy's feet went out from under him and he fell heavily. It provided Abel with the few seconds he needed to reach the front door, fling it open, and stampede down the gravel to the road.

"You must call the police," he pleaded with Elizabeth. "He's your brother and I'm sorry—but he's mad!"

"I will, darling. Finish your drink and I'll bring you another." She was applying medication and a bandage to his wounded hand.

The whiskey was almost straight and it burned Abel's mouth, but he needed it. "I'm sure he killed those two young people who came to the door the other day. I have no proof, but I'm certain. And I believe he's killed seventeen other people before this. He was certainly going to kill me!"

"He was always getting into trouble and I've tried to protect him," Elizabeth said. "And now it's come to this." There was a tear in her eye. She took Abel's empty glass and brought it back full. He was in no mood for supper, so by the time he finished his second whiskey he was ready for early bed.

Tucked under the sheet, his head floating, he shivered slightly. Elizabeth frowned with concern, slipped out of her dress, lifted the sheet, and lay beside him to ease his anxiety. Just before he fell asleep he repeated, "You will call the police?"

"Yes, I promise."

And Elizabeth was as good as her word—in fact, she called not only the local constable but the Volunteer Fire Department, too. But by the time they arrived her beautiful white house was a smoldering ruin.

"It was my boarder," she told the Fire Chief. "He drank too much and he would smoke in bed in spite of my warnings. And he was such a nice man."

"What will you do, Miss Purdy? The house is a total loss."

"I'm sorry about that, of course. But there's plenty of money in

the bank. And my brother Gerald lives alone down the road. He'll take me in."

She spent the morning napping at Gerald's house and the afternoon sweeping and dusting. "There's a lot to do here to get things in shape, young man, and I intend to see it done. You'll have to do your share and that includes behaving yourself as much as possible. You're a mischievous young scamp, but you'll have to try—you really will. I'm tired of cleaning up your messes."

But Gerald Purdy, submerged by the weight of his sister's personality, sat in the bay window with his robe and slippers on and did nothing.

So all the chores were left to Elizabeth. Which was all right, since she enjoyed being busy. In fact, darkness had fallen when she took a stepladder and hammer to the front porch where she busied herself with the final detail of a full day's work.

And the next morning, when the sun's first rays struck the front of the old house which sorely needed paint and would now soon get it, they flashed on the shiny new metal of the number



Florence V. Mayberry

Doll Baby

Some stories almost defy description. Florence V. Mayberry's "Doll Baby" is one of these unclassifiable ones. It's about San Francisco and Doll Baby and her mother, Mrs. Clanahan, and her sisters, Clarissa (Sissie) and Josie, and her brother Murphy and her husband Henry and Mr. Bagliotti (Blobby Face)—all seen through the eyes and heard by the ears of ten-year-old Ruby. If we still believe that children should be seen and not heard, then we shouldn't live in glass houses and leave all the doors and windows open . . .

She didn't look like a doll baby to me. She looked like an old lady of maybe 30, older than my mother who got married when she was 16 and now she's 27 and I'm ten. Doll Baby had droops beside her mouth. The few times I saw her in the morning, before she got up out of bed around noon, she had red eyes. Except the time one was black. I certainly never wanted any doll baby with droops and red eyes.

But Clarissa, my best friend who is one year older than me, called her Doll Baby and wiggled like a puppy bringing a ball when she carried in Doll Baby's breakfast on a tray. Mrs. Clanahan, Clarissa's mother, said Doll Baby was her first baby and she thought she'd never have another one because the hospital did horrible things to her insides. So because Doll Baby was so tiny and cute, like she could take a bath in a teacup, Mrs. Clanahan always called her Doll Baby instead of her real name, which nobody remembered. Clarissa's other sister, Josie, who is 18 now and works in a bakery, called her Doll Baby and when she was home hung around her asking how she put on makeup. Murphy Clanahan, who is 20 and never worked except in pinball places, called his sister Doll Baby and got a sweet, sweet look when he said it. A sweet-sweet look on a weaselly face looks icky. And Murphy's face is weaselly.

Doll Baby's whole family was real icky about her. I always wondered why. She didn't grab me. Skinny old grownup lady staying in bed most of the day with droops and red eyes.

Oh, I forgot. Henry called her Doll Baby too. Henry was her husband. He slept in a room down the hall from Doll Baby. It bugged her to sleep with anybody, she said. Couldn't get her rest. So Henry always tiptoed past her door when he went to work, even though Henry didn't get up too early himself. He had some kind of job visiting franchise restaurants and had to drive a lot out of San Francisco where Mrs. Clanahan had her house. He was away from home most of the time. And, gee, I wished he wasn't. Henry was great, really great.

One morning I was upstairs with Clarissa and looked out of her room when Henry went down the hall on his way to work. He didn't see me, but I saw Henry. He stopped by Doll Baby's door, opened it a crack and got a silly smile—not icky on Henry, just silly—on his face. He softly closed the door. Then, for crying out loud, what do you think he did? He kissed the door. The regular old wood. Then he went downstairs looking happy as anything.

I thought, what can I do to make people crazy about me like they're crazy about Doll Baby?

She had a littly tiny voice. Like one of those toy bells on cat collars. It carried though. It could tinkle clear through Mrs. Clanahan's house, which was two stories high. "Ma, where's Clarissa? I want my breakfast. Ma, has Josie gone to work yet, I want my pink suit ironed, then will you iron it, Ma? Murph, come in here, I got something for you."

Murphy was Doll Baby's favorite. She even looked icky herself when she saw him. Sometimes Murphy would come out of Doll Baby's room with a bill. Once I saw 20 on one of them as he was stuffing it in his pants pocket.

"Sissie, come rub my back, willya honey? I can't rest I'm so nervous." Sometimes Clarissa would get a quarter for rubbing her back, or washing her stockings, or picking up things in her room. But mostly Doll Baby just paid her by telling her stories.

"Sissie, hon, you want to remember this. Always play it big. Never no second-class—first-class or nothing."

"What do you mean, Doll Baby, what do you mean?"

"Well, I . . ." And then a story would come out. If I was there I'd sit outside the door and listen. And once in a while Doll Baby would let me come in too. Wow!

Like how Doll Baby was in the St. Francis Hotel lobby and a fella in a turtleneck shirt and tweed clothes from England came over and started talking, y'know, just started talking. You should of seen the diamond on his pinkie, Sissie. And a carved-looking gold watchband. So, because he was so nice, a real gentleman and hungry and a stranger in town, Doll Baby did him a favor by eating dinner with him. Oh man! Top of the Mark, then some place down in Eyetalian Town. He was a real gentleman, high-class and loaded.

"Don't ever tell Henry, hear?" And Clarissa would promise she wouldn't. The whole family never told Henry anything. But Doll Baby never said not to tell me.

Clarissa and I had a special secrets-place. It was a window seat in front of a stained-glass window on the second-floor landing. Clarissa was filling me in on what I didn't already hear, about the high-class man in English tweed. Just as she was doing it Henry walked down the stairs on his way to work. It made us giggle. He darn near caught us with Doll Baby's secret.

But Doll Baby's real thriller was the big-time cigarette and pinball machine man. Lots of other machines too, maybe even candy and gum ones. Imagine, every time anybody dropped in a nickel or a dime this man got it. Wow!

Well, when Doll Baby was in the St. Francis lobby she saw this fella staring at her from another divan. Pretty soon he walked over and sat beside her. He was dressed quiet, had a quiet voice too, real gentlemanly, nothing flashy. Looked like a father with a family, so Doll Baby knew it would be all right to be friendly, just a nice man passing the time of day.

What do you think? This was the man who owned practically all those nickel and dime and quarter machines in San Francisco!

"Then what happened?"

Well, most of the high-class men Doll Baby met down at the St. Francis spent plenty. But none like this guy. Man! Like money was water out of a faucet. You'd think he owned San Francisco with Oakland thrown in for good measure.

Not long after Clarissa told me this, Doll Baby began to clam up on stories. Or just told dopey big-nothing ones. Like flying to Reno in the morning and flying back the next day, but nothing about what happened in between. That was one of the times Henry was out of town. But, gee, so she flew to Reno and back. Everybody flies fast. Big deal.

But it was a pretty good story the time Doll Baby flew to Las Vegas. A bad storm hit the plane, all of a sudden, and she smashed her eye against some kind of a corner. It hurt so bad she couldn't remember just what. Poor Doll Baby, Clarissa said. It was a terrible problem, because she didn't want Henry to know she went to Las Vegas.

"What did she tell Henry?"

"Doll Baby is always taking baths," Clarissa said. "Maybe two or three every day if she thinks she's not clean the first or second time. All the family knows she's always taking baths. So she told Henry she got dizzy in the shower and keeled over onto one of the water knobs. Now Henry is having a handrail put in the shower."

Just then Henry came down the stairs with a piece of beefsteak in his hand that he'd been putting on Doll Baby's eye. Clarissa and I were about split with the giggles.

"What you kids giggling about?" Henry asked. Henry has a real nice smile. Like he really likes you. "How come little girls always get the giggles, heh? If I didn't have this beefsteak in my hand I'd tickle you, then you'd giggle but good! Maybe I will anyway."

He waved the beefsteak in front of our faces while we squealed and giggled some more. We knew he wouldn't do it, but it was scary fun. Mrs. Clanahan always said Henry shoulda had a dozen kids, he was so crazy about them, but poor little Doll Baby wasn't up to *that*. Good thing for those kids. She'd have been a lousy mother.

"Say, Clarissa pet," Henry said then. "Keep your ears peeled. So if Doll Baby calls for something. She's not feeling too good. Here," and he reached in his pocket with his free hand and pulled out a dollar bill for Clarissa. Then he must have felt bad seeing me with no money. So he reached in again and handed me a quarter. "That's for giggling quieter so Clarissa can hear Doll Baby."

So we giggled some more, but quieter. Henry sure was a nice man.

After Henry left, Clarissa went up. Doll Baby took off the long-sleeved bedjacket she was wearing over her pajamas and pulled off the pajama top. Clarissa took one side of her back and I took the other. That's when I saw the other bruises. Wow! Everywhere. She'd have had to have fits in the airplane to get all those bruises.

"Go easy, kids," Doll Baby said in her little bitty voice. Like a doll baby-doll with a tinny voice. She groaned and grunted,

unh-h, unh-h, over and over. Tears began to stream down my face, and I snuffled. Doll Baby looked up at me with her purply red eye and got a soft wondering look. The nicest look she ever gave me. "Why, you sweet little kid! Honest to God, that's the sweetest thing. Look how sorry Ruby is for me, Sissie. Honey, you love Doll Baby too, don'tya?"

I knew better than to tell even Clarissa that I wasn't really very sorry. It was just that the groans set my teeth on edge and gave me the willies. Like a dog howls if he hears the right kind of noise, and he isn't a bit sorry about anything.

Doll Baby began to cry. Not sad crying. Or nervous, like mine. Mad. She swore too. Then she said, "Rat! Rat!"

"Oh, Doll Baby, was there a rat in the airplane?" Clarissa asked. "Imagine, a rat and all that storm too! Did the pilot have to come and catch it? Oooh, Ruby, it was a rat made Doll Baby slip and fall!"

"Don't be so dumb, Sissie!" Doll Baby said in her whiny voice. "Not that kinda rat. I'm just letting off steam because I hurt. Listen, don't you blab everything I say to your Ma, hear? Because if you do I won't ever tell you nothing any more."

"Oh, I won't, I never do, cross my heart!"

"Don't you dare tell Ma I got bruises all over besides the black eye."

"I won't. I promise, forever and ever."

"Ma would have a tizzy. She'd break down and tell Henry and have him get a doctor. Mind what I say, Sissie. And don't ever tell Henry. Or even Murph."

"Josie?" Clarissa asked.

"Well-l-l—no, don't tell Josie either. She's not here enough to care and she's got a big mouth besides. And Ruby here—"

"Ruby don't ever tell things to grownups. Just to me."

Doll Baby gave me the purply red eye again, considering. "Yeah. I never hear a peep outa her. Just big eyes. Probably big ears too. Just keep it that way, Ruby, honey. Gee, Sissie, look, she's still got tears in her eyes. But remember, no big mouth or you and Sissie won't be playing together no more."

I began to cry again. Cry and rub. I wondered what Doll Baby would do if I poked a finger right in the middle of one of those ugly-looking bruises.

Doll Baby kept grunting and groaning, and swearing once in a while and saying how she was never going no more on no air-

planes out of the state, there was more fun just hanging around the St. Francis, and how you could get a guy for taking a woman out of the state. She must have been knocked a little cuckoo. Anybody knows that a pilot takes men and women and children out of the state all the time.

Doll Baby hung around the house, oh, maybe a week. She never did that before. The house wasn't very pretty. It was one of those old, old houses like all over San Francisco, with a curlicue fireplace mantel and knobs on the stair banisters and all dark wood-work. Mrs. Clanahan hung onto it because Mr. Clanahan, who was a dead streetcar motorman, had worked hard all his days to buy it and it kept that dear soul, she said, close to her. Doll Baby never could stand it much. She left it every day as quick as she could struggle out of bed.

That is, until this week. This week she sat a lot in a chair by her bedroom window, looking out at the street.

One afternoon when Clarissa and I were rubbing her feet, one to each foot, she let out a yip. Like a mouse that had figured how quick it could dodge the trap, but didn't. Clarissa and I looked up. Doll Baby had an expression like somebody had lifted her by her long blonde hair and was dangling her. Her eyes were spread open, her skin stretched tight.

"What's the matter, Doll Baby?" Clarissa asked. "You sick again? You want me to call Ma?"

"Shut up!" Doll Baby whispered. "Oh, God, I gotta get outa here! I gotta go down—"

She jumped up and started for her clothes closet. She threw a dress on the bed. "Get my new patent pumps, Sissie! Hand me that beige body stocking!" Hand me this, hand me that.

I looked out of the window. Big deal. Nothing scary out there. The Greek candy store across the street, and Weinheimer's Delicatessen and Fine Foods, and Joe's Cleaners. All those old brown flats. A few people were walking along, mostly women carrying shopping bags with vegetables sticking out the top.

Then I noticed this man in the long dark-green sedan. Directly across the street. Every few minutes he looked up at Clarissa's house, like he had a timer on him. Yicky! He had a knobby old face like it was made out of concrete and had set in blobs. His eyes squinted into little dark holes when he looked up at the second-floor window where I was peeking out.

What business did he have watching Clarissa's house?

I stood full in front of the window and stuck my tongue out at him. The next time the man's timer worked I stuck my tongue out again. Good thing. He reached for his key to turn on the motor.

"Get the hell away from there!" Doll Baby screeched. She grabbed my shoulder and flung me away from the window. Then she stretched her mouth in a big frozen grin and waved at that man.

Boy oh boy was Doll Baby mad at me! I couldn't come to Clarissa's house and play for nearly a month. It hurt my feelings. I only stuck out my tongue because he was what made Doll Baby look so scared, his ugly old face staring at the house.

By the time I could come to play with Clarissa again, Doll Baby was all healed up from her bruises. But who wouldn't heal after getting that new mink coat Henry gave her? "She looked so cute when Henry gave it to her," Clarissa told me. "She's so little and got such a teensy-tiny face with such big blue eyes. She just looked up at Henry and cried and thanked him in baby talk. She talks the cutest baby talk to Henry. It's silly but it's cute. She still felt weak, so Henry carried her downstairs with her all wrapped up in the coat."

A mouse is little and has a teensy-tiny face with big eyes. But yicky! Cute, no.

"What do you think?" Clarissa said a few days later. "Murphy's got a fancy new job. After a while he may make a million dollars!"

"Did he quit his pinball machine job?"

"Silly! That wasn't a real job before. He just played 'em. This is with the big boss of the pinball machines, Mr. Bagliotti. It's a real job. Murphy drives a big beautiful green car. He's a chauffeur."

Clarissa was a year older than me, but she sounded like a baby. Anybody knows from television that chauffeurs don't make a million dollars. Unless they murder the millionaire they're driving around and get into his safe.

"Is Murphy going to be a murderer now?" I asked.

Clarissa slapped my face and cried. And I cried and explained how the television shows all said chauffeurs don't get to be millionaires unless they lead a life of crime, so blame television, don't blame me. Anyway Clarissa, not me, said Murphy might make a million dollars.

"I never either said it! I heard it. Doll Baby told Murphy. She told him to hang onto the job and watch his P's and Q's and he might end up a millionaire like Mr. Bagliotti. Mr. Bagliotti will

tell him how to do it, so why would he want to murder Mr. Bagliotti? You want me to tell Doll Baby what you said?"

"Wow! No! Not after she had just finished grounding me for almost a month. This might get me life."

"I didn't understand—please, please don't be mad, Clarissa. You didn't tell me all of it, so I didn't understand."

I did too understand. It was still just like television movies. That ugly blobby-faced man was a gangster. And he was going to train Murphy to be a gangster. I couldn't have cared less about weaselly-faced Murphy. But Clarissa was my best friend. I wished I dared warn her.

After that Doll Baby went riding almost every day. Murphy would call for her about noon and off she'd go to some fancy lunch. Doll Baby told Clarissa that Murphy had a lot of free time and his boss was so nice, he let Murphy use the car and go anywhere he liked. Said he could take his family too. A couple of times Murphy took Mrs. Clanahan and Josie and Clarissa along with Doll Baby. His boss had given him a big tip for some special work and he took the whole bunch up to Lake Tahoe. For a whole weekend! That was the time Henry was back in Kansas City seeing about barbecued hamburgers or something.

After that weekend Clarissa said Henry got nervous about Doll Baby driving around in other people's cars. He offered to buy her a very own car of her own. "But she didn't want it. Doll Baby's too little to handle a car," Clarissa said, in that icky voice the family always got when they talked about Doll Baby. "She's got the littlest hands and little short legs, they wouldn't reach the brakes."

"They would so," I said. "I'm only ten years old. And one day when my folks were at work I got my mother's automobile keys and backed down the driveway. Then I drove the car back in the garage. And my legs reached. There's a gadget you shove the seat backwards and forwards with."

"She's too little and nervous for traffic. It makes her heart beat fast. You calling Doll Baby a liar?"

So I had to apologize again before Clarissa would promise not to tell Doll Baby on me.

Henry had a nice car. Almost as big as the green sedan. I think he must have been jealous of Murphy's green sedan. Because one Saturday he polished his car up beautiful. Clarissa and I helped him. He gave us each 50 cents and took us for a ride to the gas

station. When we came back to the house he ran upstairs to Doll Baby's bedroom. "Doll Baby, it's a beautiful day. Let's take off for the hills someplace for the weekend."

"Hen-n-reeee! Shut the door, pul-l-leese!" That's the way she talked to Henry. Whiny. "My poooor itty head's splitting!"

He moved farther into the room instead of going back to the door to shut it. "That's because you stayed out so late last night. Doll Baby, honey, you're giving me ideas about why you're out late so many times when I come home. It's always after midnight. Of course, I realize, Baby, you get lonesome with me away—"

"Hen-n-reeee, honest, aw hon-néeee, Doll Baby's big boy-eee gonna be jealous? How'd I know Henry boy'd be back from Portland so quick? I told you last night, some of the girls and me went out on the town, just itty old girls and me."

Nobody said anything for a minute.

"Since when did Murphy start tagging around with you and your girl friends, and them five to ten years older than he is? And in his boss's green car that Murphy—or somebody who looked a lot bigger than Murphy—took off with after you were dropped off here. I was watching for you, Doll Baby."

"Good God! You saying I'm a liar, it wasn't Murphy! You just ask Murph, you see what he says. And since when can't I be out with my own brother?"

Doll Baby screeched and screeched, and the bedsprings started banging and creaking. It sounded like she was having another fit, like she must have had in the airplane. Mrs. Clanahan rushed up from the kitchen with a pan of warm water and a washcloth, yelling for somebody to fetch her prescription bottle of pills. Henry ran to the head of the stairs, yelling, "Damn it, no! She has her own prescription." When he saw the pan and washcloth he said, "I'll wash her face myself. I'll take care of her. I'm her husband!"

He looked sick when he said that. Like he needed someone to wash his face.

After a while they got Doll Baby to sleep. It took a long time before the pills and Henry rubbing her back worked. She kept yipping in that teensy voice that went through you like a knife. I could even hear it clear into Clarissa's room with the door shut. I hid in there because the sound was making me cry.

When it got quiet, Clarissa found me in her room. "Ma! Henry! Lookit Ruby, she's crying about Doll Baby. Ruby just loves Doll Baby. Aw, Ruby, don't cry. Doll Baby's gonna be all right."

Henry and Ma came in and looked at me. Mrs. Clanahan kissed my forehead and stroked my hair. Henry patted my head and said, "Sissie, you sure have yourself a good little kid for a friend. Hey, now, I can't stand to see little girls cry, so I'll have to get you happy again. How would you kids like to take a long ride? For the whole day. Have lunch somewhere."

We squealed and jumped up and down. So Henry called my mother and we took off for Carmel. Henry looked so cute, that is if he didn't have black circles under his eyes. He was wearing his favorite coat, his Canadian sport coat. Henry was from Canada and lots of times he was homesick and sad. So when he was he wore a funny kind of sport coat, dark blue with a colored emblem on the front and fancy brass buttons down by his wrists. He brought it down from Canada and I bet he was the only man in San Francisco with a coat like that. People stared at him a lot when he wore it. But I thought it was cute, like an admiral or something. I just loved those pretty brass buttons.

Golly! What a fun place Carmel was with all those stores and outdoor restaurants. Henry bought us each a wooden Swedish doll. He was such a nice man. "I don't know why Doll Baby likes the green sedan better than your car," I said as Henry drove us home. "It's almost as big as the green sedan. And you're better-looking than old Blobby Face."

The car began to wiggle on the freeway. When it straightened out Henry asked, "Who's Blobby Face?"

I was sitting in the back seat like I always did, like Henry was my chauffeur and Clarissa was my maid. So Clarissa had to turn around when she made faces at me. For me to shut up. "Oh, just the man Murphy works for," I said.

"What's Blobby Face got to do with Doll Baby liking to ride in the green sedan? I thought it was Murphy who drove her around."

"Uh-huh," I said. "Murphy does drive her. It was only that once I saw his boss. He's ugly. So I don't like his car."

Henry kind of snorted. "Neither do I," he said.

A few days later when I went to Clarissa's house the whole family was screeching and crying. Except for Henry who was out of town. But even with all that noise Doll Baby's whiny voice rode on top. I had to swallow hard to keep back the tears. I didn't want to distract them from telling me what they were yelling about.

It was about Murphy. It seems Murphy was shot and in the jail hospital. Poor Murphy, he was just driving Mr. Bagliotti around

to a meeting. And after he dropped off Mr. Bagliotti, in a little while some dumb cops came up and shot him.

"We'll sue the damn city!" Mrs. Clanahan sobbed. "My poor little boy! Working steady on his first good job, minding his own business and look what happens! Doll Baby, you got him that job. You go see Mr. Bagliotti and have him get Murphy out. A big important man like that, it'll be better if *he* sues the police."

For a wonder Doll Baby shut right up. She said, very reasonable, "Ma, we can't order a bigshot like Mr. Bagliotti what to do." Then real quick she added, "Come to think, though, you may have something. I'll call Dag—Mr. Bagliotti." Her voice got real prissy. "He may be kind enough to drive me downtown to a lawyer and to see Murph." Big sigh. "It would be such a help. Buses wear me out and taxis cost so much."

She went upstairs to her room to telephone. I went upstairs to go to the bathroom and walked slow and tiptoe by her door. And stopped. "Listen, listen, it's my *brother* who got caught. Whatever he was doing he was doing it for you. Now, listen, you and I got him into this, we gotta get him out!"

Doll Baby couldn't even whisper quiet. "Dagger, this is a"—right in here she said a horrible word—"mess. You got the power to spring him. No, Dagger, no! Of course I wouldn't tell them. I'd never open my peep on you, you know that, honey. Only, it's my brother and I'm crazy about the kid. Please come get me. I need to see you! Okay, okay."

I ran quick into the bathroom.

The green sedan never came. After a while Doll Baby came downstairs in her mink coat. "Murph's boss is terribly busy. But he's kindly sending a cab for me so I can consult him in his office. He's a real gentleman," she said.

Clarissa and I were more thrilled than sad about Murphy. Imagine, a member of your very own family shot and in jail!

"Let's go visit him," I said. "I never saw anybody shot."

"I don't know if Doll Baby would like that."

"Ask your mother."

"No. She'd want to go along. And she'd tell Doll Baby."

"Let's go alone. I've been saving Henry's money. We can go on the bus and buy something for Murphy."

"I don't know where the jail hospital is. Ruby, you ask your mother where the jail hospital is."

I thought about that, but it didn't have the right sound. "Let's

go downtown to the City Hall and ask a policeman or the Mayor."

It was scary at the City Hall, with everybody but us grownups. Clarissa asked a man where the Mayor was because we had a favor to ask of him.

"Is that so?" the man said, grinning. "What kind of favor?"

So Clarissa said her brother was in the jail hospital and she and her friend had a present for him but we didn't know where the jail hospital was.

Then a whole bunch of men came around us, grinning and patting us on the heads. "What kind of a present?" one asked.

I whispered to Clarissa, "Better show them. They think we've got a key or a saw or something to spring Murphy."

So Clarissa showed them the hamburger.

They found out Murphy's name and our names and Clarissa's address and phone number. Then they bought us some hot chocolate out of a machine. Was it fun! I never knew they had all that fun at a City Hall.

Henry came down and picked us up. He had read the story about Murphy in a Fresno paper and drove home like crazy to see if he could help. When the men at City Hall told him about the present for Murphy and how we wanted to see how he was, Henry hugged us both, said one was his wife's little sister and both of us were his special girl friends. Gee! Henry was great.

He was so nice I wanted to help him. "Henry," I said as he drove us home, "old Blobby Face got Murphy in trouble and then let him take the rap."

"Huh! What's that?" Henry parked at the curb and looked back at me. "Where did you hear anything about 'rap'?"

"Oh, phooey, all the movies talk about 'taking a rap.' And Murphy's in jail and shot, isn't he? And Clarissa's Mom says Murphy's a good boy and working hard now. And he's working for Blobby Face. So it must be a rap."

Henry looked at me, very steady. "What gives you the idea Blobby Face did this? The paper said Murphy had his own racket—his own job, bothering pinball machine operators. And somebody—Murphy, they think—shot the operator."

"And then the operator shot Murphy!" Boy!

Henry looked tired. "They don't know. They can't find another gun. Only the one with Murphy's fingerprints on it."

"Why don't they ask the operator?"

Henry shook his head. "The shot hit his throat, so he can't talk.

Hey, you brats, you've got me talking too much, you and your movies. But I'd like to know more about Blobby Face. How about it, Sissie?"

"I never saw him, ever," Clarissa said. "Ruby's the only one. She watched him through Doll Baby's window one day and stuck out her tongue at him. Remember when Ruby wasn't around for a whole month? Doll Baby grounded her for insulting Murphy's boss."

"Only he wasn't Murphy's boss yet," I said. "That came after."

"Tell me about Blobby Face, Ruby." Henry's voice was so quiet it almost whispered.

So I did. How Blobby Face was staring up at the house that time Doll Baby was covered with bruises, that time she fell—I started to say "fell in the airplane going to Las Vegas" but I remembered in time. And when Doll Baby saw that awful face looking at the house it scared her so bad she said she had to get out of the house, like that face put a curse on it. So I looked out the window and stuck out my tongue. And I guessed Doll Baby thought it was impolite because she swore at me.

"He was in that green sedan Murphy drives now. So he must be Mr. Dagger Bagliotti who's going to make Murphy a millionaire."

"Dagger?"

I nodded. "That's what Doll Baby calls him over the telephone."

Clarissa gritted her teeth at me. "You shut up! You promised never to tell anything about Doll Baby!"

"What did I tell? I never told any secrets you told me that Doll Baby said not to tell! I just told what I knew my own self!"

"Be quiet, Sissie," Henry said. "If you're going to be mad, be mad at me. When did she talk on the telephone to—Dagger?"

"Today. Just before we went downtown. She wants Mr. Dagger Bagliotti to spring Murphy because he's got the power and she'll never open her peep on Dagger. But he wouldn't come and get her. He sent a cab. Maybe she and Mr. Dagger Bagliotti are in the jail right now with Murphy."

"Sissie, here's some money. So you and Ruby can go on home on the bus. Your mother's worried about you—maybe Ruby's mother too, if your mother called her. So tell them you were good little girls, Henry said so, and you went to see Murphy because you were thoughtful. Tell them Henry gave you extra money to go to the movies—no, on second thought, stay out of those movies. Get a banana split instead."

That night Clarissa telephoned me. "Goodbye!" she said. Right at the beginning. "You're not my best friend any more, old blabbermouth!"

"I never told any secrets! You heard me. It was all my very own stuff."

"Old blabbermouth! You've got Doll Baby all bruised up again. What you said made Henry go downtown to see Murphy. And because Murphy was so sick—Henry told Doll Baby he was probably out of his head—he told Henry where Mr. Bagliotti's office was. And when Henry got to the office, Doll Baby was there too!" Clarissa began to cry. "It's awful. You ought to see Doll Baby. Her whole arm's black and blue. Maybe more of her too. Henry's with her in her room, I didn't see."

"Henry beat her up?" Wow! Good old Henry!

"Dope." Clarissa snuffled. "Henry don't beat up anything. But with Henry knocking on the office door and trying to come in while she was having a nervous talk with Mr. Bagliotti, why Doll Baby got more nervous and fell against the office furniture before Henry got inside."

"Clarissa, please don't be mad at me. I'm sick and tired of making up."

"Well-l-l—but if you blabbermouth again, I will never speak to you. Doll Baby hasn't blamed you yet. She's just talking about her bruises and how dumb Henry was to go barging in like that. So if you want to you can come over tomorrow morning."

It was a good thing it was school vacation. Clarissa and I got in on everything. Gee! Think what we'd have missed if we had to go to school. Because next morning when I went over to Clarissa's everybody was in an uproar again. It was the most fun place I ever knew.

Doll Baby had left home. Right in the middle of the night. Before Henry figured what was happening and while everybody else was asleep. Henry tried to follow her, Clarissa said. But he came back after a while because he couldn't find her. He even took out his car and went to Mr. Bagliotti's office. But a couple of thugs grabbed him by the arms and shoved him back in his car. "Henry says it's the end," Clarissa said. "Doll Baby's left him for good."

Mrs. Clanahan kept crying and saying, "Damn that Henry, he ought to have stayed home more. My poor little Doll Baby was alone too much."

It didn't seem to me Doll Baby was very alone with all those

rich people down in the St. Francis lobby and eating all the time in fancy restaurants. But maybe they just ate and didn't talk.

"Henry's out looking for her again," Clarissa whispered to me. "He's got a broken heart. He didn't even take his clothes off last night, just walked up and down the stairs all night. You ought to see his face. Big black circles under his eyes."

"Maybe they're black like Doll Baby's. Maybe he fought Mr. Bagliotti. Because Mr. Bagliotti made Doll Baby nervous."

"Dumb!" Clarissa said. "Henry wouldn't fight anybody unless Doll Baby told him to, and she likes Mr. Bagliotti."

Henry came in the house. And he was dumber than me. Because he had on his pretty Canadian sport coat with the brass buttons, and it was all messed up from wearing it all night, dusty all over and wrinkled.

"You see Doll Baby or that Mr. Bagliotti?" Mrs. Clanahan asked.

Henry shook his head. "Tried," he said. "But no. It's like trying to see a general with an army all around. That first time I got to his office must have been a fluke."

"Murphy's boss is really important," Mrs. Clanahan said. "He'll be sure to get Murphy out when he explains Murphy got framed by the police. Now, Henry, you just sit tight. Doll Baby's had flareups before and always came back, she's a highstrung little thing."

Henry looked like he was going to throw up. He hurried up to Doll Baby's room and shut the door. The bedsprings went down, like he went to bed there instead of in his own room. Then he got up and started walking around. Still with his clothes on. Pretty soon he came downstairs and said he had to go down to Half Moon Bay on business, but he'd be back for supper in case Doll Baby telephoned.

Clarissa and I grabbed hold of him, hugged his arms and begged please, please, could we go with him. "Kids, it's business, you can't go this time."

We kept hanging onto him and promising we wouldn't bother his business talking and we'd be quiet and besides, we were nervous and needed a ride. Clarissa started to cry real hard and that did it. I just about drowned myself in tears.

Henry wiped our faces with his handkerchief and said okay.

Clarissa and I tried to make Henry feel good. We sang silly songs. Finally Henry joined in and made us laugh, his voice

sounded so squeaky and tight. And he gave us each a candy bar he had stuffed in his glove compartment. I decided if Doll Baby would just stay away forever that I would grow up and marry Henry, and get him to do everything I wanted.

Henry parked the car before we got to Half Moon Bay, out where there was nobody, high on the cliffs overlooking the beach and the ocean. It was on a point away from the road and real great. Quiet except for the gulls squawking and the waves pounding. I guess Henry wanted it quiet so he could think, all alone. Because he said for Clarissa and me to stay put by the car, he was going to take a walk. He scrambled and slid down the cliff and went walking along the sand.

Gee! He stayed a long time. We could see him away down the beach. Finally we got chilly and hungry. We looked in the glove compartment for more candy bars. And then all over the car because Henry almost always had candy or peanuts around.

There weren't any anywhere. "Let's look in the trunk," I said. "He carries suitcases and things in there. I bet there's some candy there too."

"You can't. He took his car keys with him."

"Oh, phooey!" I said. "Robbers don't mess around with keys. Only it's not really robbing because Henry won't care if we eat his candy. I opened the trunk of my folks' car once without any key. Only I need a knife. Like a Boy Scout knife or something."

We looked in the glove compartment for maybe a knife. And there was a long skinny one with two blades, with a ring on its end. I opened one of the blades, stuck it in the keyhole of the trunk, and then slammed the end of it hard with a rock. Clarissa got afraid I was going to scratch the paint and squealed and ran back in the car. I slammed it a couple of more times and whump! The trunk lid flew up.

I wish it hadn't.

Doll Baby looked awful. Horrible. With her tongue sticking out and her face white and purple. Dead has an awful look, with everything gone but the outside.

I screamed. Clarissa came and started to scream, but it choked off. She fell down, almost fainted. When she got up she went to the cliff edge and was sick. I kept on screaming. Henry finally heard and started running back.

Clarissa and I couldn't talk. We just pointed, and cried. Henry looked dead too when he saw Doll Baby. Everything was so awful

that Clarissa and I turned our backs. Henry could hardly get us into the car and then he went for the police.

Wow! They almost got Henry for murdering Doll Baby. Said he was jealous and killed her and stuffed her in the car trunk until he could hide her someplace else. But Henry's lawyer said would Henry invite a couple of kids to go on a ride and then leave them alone in the car with a dead body in the trunk, knowing they were the fooling-around kind of kids, would that be good sense? He would have gone by himself. And the whole family knew when Henry went out to find Doll Baby after she left in the night. No, they didn't know what time she left but Henry woke them up, saying she was gone and he was going to go find her. Henry had gone to Mr. Bagliotti's office looking for her and Mr. Bagliotti's thugs shoved him back in his car. The thugs knew exactly where Henry's car was because they took him right to it, so they could have put Doll Baby in it before they shoved Henry back.

The lawyer said lots more too. All about Murphy driving Mr. Bagliotti and getting shot and being a juvenile fall guy. All about Henry finding Doll Baby in Mr. Bagliotti's office all covered with bruises. A whole lot about those machines that Mr. Bagliotti owned and Murphy was collecting for. It was in all the papers.

You know what? My picture was even in the papers. Because when the reporters came around Clarissa's house I was there. Now that Doll Baby couldn't ground me I wasn't afraid of being a blabbermouth. Besides, good old Henry was in trouble. So I told them about old Blobby Face scaring Doll Baby. And me sticking out my tongue. And how Doll Baby fell in the airplane the time she went to Las Vegas after she met Mr. Bagliotti, and got a black eye and bruises. Only Henry thought she fell in the shower.

I told them maybe old Blobby Face pushed her that time, and later on too when she fell all over his office furniture. Because I heard Doll Baby talking over the telephone to Blobby—Mr. Bagliotti—trying to get him to spring Murphy. And he must have got mad because she said all excited she'd never open her peep on him even though they had both got Murphy into trouble, and then she went to see him in a taxi he sent for her. Only she didn't call him Blobby Face or Mr. Bagliotti, she called him Dagger.

Well, after Henry's lawyer got through telling everything Mr. Bagliotti went to jail. So what good did his pinball machines do him then? They couldn't prove, not exactly, that he killed Doll Baby. What they thought was he had somebody else do it and

then stuff Doll Baby in Henry's car trunk. What he went to jail for was for shooting Murphy after Murphy shot the pinball operator, because Murphy was stealing from him. They finally sewed up the operator's throat and he told all about it. So if Mr. Bagliotti shot Murphy, why wouldn't he shoot Doll Baby? Anyway, good old Henry didn't get blamed.

I never told anybody about the brass button of Henry's Canadian sport coat. The one that was caught in the fancy sequin trim around the neck of Doll Baby's dress. Right in front, the button was, where I saw it first thing when the car trunk lid flew up.

It wasn't there when the police took Doll Baby out of the trunk. Because I looked when they did it and the button wasn't there. And nobody ever said anything about finding a button. But later, when Henry had on his Canadian coat another time, all the buttons were on it. And they all matched. Only, one button on his left cuff was sewed on with a different color of thread, the dumb way my father sews on things when my mother isn't around.

But gee, it could have been pulled off and stuck on those sequins any old time, couldn't it?

All the same, I've changed my mind. I'm not going to marry Henry after all. Maybe he wouldn't do everything I wanted him to.



E. X. Ferrars

Ashes to Ashes

E. X. Ferrars' "Ashes to Ashes" is a fine example of the semidocumentary fiction that English crime writers do so extremely well—a moving, perceptive story full of realistic details almost tenderly observed. The kind of crime story that has a lasting mnemonic quality . . .

66 **Y**ou go mad whenever that man's away," Mrs. Harley said in a shrill voice from the doorway. Her bent figure was robed in a crimson, quilted dressing gown, her white hair was carefully curled on rollers. Her arthritic hands grasped the two sticks without which she could not walk. "Vacuuming the carpet at nine o'clock in the evening. What's got into you? Couldn't it have waited till morning?"

Her daughter Alison switched off the vacuum cleaner and her mind emerged from the daze into which it had been lulled by the throbbing hum of the machine.

"I'm sorry," she said. She never had much to say for herself. "Did you really think I couldn't hear it in my room?"

Mrs. Harley's room was on the ground floor. It had once been the dining room of the big old house but was now furnished with the double bed and massive wardrobe that dated back beyond the 30 years of her widowhood. The cloakroom had been turned into a bathroom for her. She never went upstairs any more.

"I was just slipping off into a doze when you got started," Mrs. Harley said. "Now I don't suppose I'll get to sleep again tonight."

"I'm sorry," Alison repeated. "I didn't think. It's just that I get so restless when he isn't here."

Her mother gave a tight little scornful smile.

"You go mad, that's what happens," she said. "He's had the most extraordinary effect on you. One would think you didn't know what it's like to sleep one night without a man next to you, though you once stood it for long enough and didn't make any fuss about it or start doing housework in the middle of the night."

The old woman seldom missed a chance to needle her daughter for not having married until she was 39. Mrs. Harley had been a very handsome woman in her day, unlike the oddly nebulous Alison, and she despised Alison for her lack of obvious attractions and was bitterly resentful that she had finally married.

"You used to go to bed early and read, or have a bath, or wash your hair," Mrs. Harley said. "Why can't you do something like that now?"

"It's just that he said he'd telephone. I don't want to be in the bath when—"

"Then go to bed. You've an extension by your bed, haven't you? Even if you drop off to sleep it'll wake you, won't it?"

"Yes, of course, only—"

"Only you go mad when he's away, almost as if you're afraid he won't come back. And why should he, after all?"

Maneuvering her weight on her sticks, Mrs. Harley turned and moved slowly down the hall.

Alison began to wind up the cord of the vacuum cleaner. She was used to doing what her mother told her, but she did not want to go to bed. With the carpet cleaned she would have liked to go on to polish the furniture. It was solid mahogany furniture, her dead father's taste, which Alison cherished out of sentiment and habit. The dark wood repaid polishing. She could make it gleam like the surface of a still pool, reflecting moonlight.

Not that there was any need for her to do the work. The daily maid was competent enough and curiously devoted to the household. She had been coming to them for years and seemed half to enjoy the bullying she constantly got from Mrs. Harley. And in the mood that Mrs. Harley was in tonight, the old woman would probably complain that even the sound of Alison moving about in the room was keeping her awake. And if Alison went to the kitchen and set about quietly making the chocolate mousse which Nigel liked so much and which would only improve if it were kept in the refrigerator until tomorrow evening, when he would return home, Mrs. Harley was capable of complaining that she was being kept awake by the whirr of the egg beater.

Reluctantly Alison went upstairs.

She had been married for six months now. Ever since it had happened, at a time when her mother, naturally, had slipped into the habit of believing that the risk of her daughter marrying and leaving her was safely past, Mrs. Harley had treated Alison as if

marriage had somehow been detrimental to her character, as if Alison's affection, loyalty, even her common sense were no longer to be trusted. Yet Alison had never once suggested leaving her. Nigel had simply moved in with them, and had always been patient and considerate with his sick, demanding mother-in-law.

But Mrs. Harley seemed to regard Nigel's very gentleness as proof—if proof were needed, which heaven knew, she said, it was not—that he had married Alison only for the fortune she would some day inherit from her mother. A bully herself, Mrs. Harley deeply distrusted mildness in others. And why else, except for her wealth, she kept asking, should anyone have wanted to marry Alison?

Yes, why indeed, Alison asked herself now, as she met her chronically tired eyes in the looking glass.

She had changed out of the clothes she had been wearing into a nightdress and dressing gown, and had sat down at the dressing table and started to brush her graying hair. Her eyes were a washed-out shade of blue and just now they were full of anxiety. She had never spoken of it to Nigel, but she was always helplessly anxious when he was away. She could not control it. That was what had driven her to vacuum the sitting-room carpet and made her want to polish the furniture at nine o'clock at night, and why, later on, when he had telephoned, she would take a sleeping pill. She could never get to sleep without one.

Her anxiety was not exactly that she would never see him again, as her mother had suggested. She was not aware of being excessively afraid that his car might crash and he'd be killed, or that he might meet some other woman and vanish away with her out of Alison's life. The feeling was more formless than that. It was as if she half believed, when he was not there to reassure her, that he did not really exist, except in her imagination.

At the time when they first met, the emptiness of her life had been so complete, her need for love so desperate, that experiencing it had caused a kind of fever in her brain, a quiet, hidden delirium. And it is possible sometimes for people to wake from delirium, to find that all the images that have possessed their minds have been delusions. When she was alone, Alison sometimes caught herself wondering if her own existence were a delusion. To doubt Nigel's was even easier.

He had left for London that morning on business. He was employed by a local firm of chartered accountants and often had

to go to London. He always telephoned Alison when he went away. But that evening he did not telephone until nearly eleven o'clock. In that household that was very late. Alison had been in bed for some time, reading a travel book. She read a great many travel books although she had never traveled, and was not even sure she really wanted to.

In the same way, in the old days, she had never been sure in her heart of hearts that she wanted a job, although she had told herself and other people that it was only because of her mother's needs that she stayed so much at home. From time to time Alison had done a certain amount of voluntary civic work, and Mrs. Harley was not so helpless that she could not be left for an odd half day once or twice a week. Yet somehow Alison's enthusiasm for causes or for her fellow workers had never lasted long.

It had been a husband that she wanted. A man of her own. Nothing else. And the force of her desire had dulled the interest that she might have felt in other things. All that she had wanted was to be able to look herself in the eye, as she had been doing in the mirror earlier in the evening, and tell herself that she was really a woman. A woman as good as other women. A fact which her mother, before the miracle of Nigel, had made sure that Alison should painfully and deeply doubt.

When the telephone rang, Alison snatched it up before it had time to ring twice.

A man's voice said, "Mr. Arkell is calling you from London and wishes you to pay for the call. Do you accept the charges?"

"Yes, yes, go ahead, please," Alison answered impatiently. When Nigel telephoned from London he usually reversed the charges, to save himself the trouble of assembling the right change for the call, or settling up with his host, if he were staying with a friend. "Nigel?" she went on immediately, as if she were afraid the connection might be broken. "Nigel?"

"Yes, darling, how are you?"

His voice was soft, precise, full of affection. His voice had been the first thing about him, apart from his rather shy interest in her, that had attracted and charmed Alison. She had not noticed that in his small, neat, unobtrusive way he was really quite good-looking. For he was shorter than she was, and it had been one of her daydreams that the man who would love her would be tall and broad and would have to stoop down to kiss her. But by now she would not have had anything about Nigel at all different.

"I was getting worried that you weren't going to phone," she said. "It's later than usual."

"I'm sorry. I've been having a long talk with Chris, trying to talk some sense into him about this idea he's got of giving up his job. He's in a particularly difficult mood. I didn't realize how late it was." Christopher was Nigel's great problem, a younger brother of whom he was very fond, but who was as unlike him as could be, an irresponsible and, as Alison believed, rather dishonest young man, who had been married and divorced twice and who changed jobs with ever-increasing frequency. "I almost didn't phone. I was afraid you'd be asleep."

"You know I never manage to fall asleep when I'm expecting you to call," Alison said.

"I'm sorry, then."

"It doesn't matter."

"Have you taken your sleeping pill yet?"

"No, I'll take it now. But tell me, Nigel—" She did not want him to hang up yet. She wanted to go on enjoying the solace of his voice. "Did you get Chris to listen to you in the end, or is he still being stubborn?"

She had met Christopher Arkell only twice, once when he had come to their wedding and had drunk too much champagne and kissed her unpleasantly and moistly, and once when she and Nigel had gone to London together and Chris, in funds at the moment, had taken them out to an expensive lunch. Alison disliked and distrusted him. But for Nigel's sake she accepted him as a cross that had to be borne, as Nigel did her mother.

"I don't know," Nigel replied. "You know what he's like. After two or three drinks he loves everyone and he'll agree with everything you say, but it doesn't mean anything. Next day it's all forgotten. And I've a feeling he's been getting himself into hot water in his present job and that if he doesn't leave of his own accord he may get eased out—or something worse. Perhaps it's really best for him to quit, though what's going to happen to him if he goes on like this . . . But there's no need to worry you with his troubles at this time of night. How's your mother?" He never forgot to ask.

"The same as usual," Alison said. "About what time do you think you'll be home tomorrow?"

"Sometime late in the afternoon, I should say. I'm very tired. It's been a long day—the drive, then business all afternoon and Chris all evening. I don't expect I'll make an early start."

"No, don't. Take care of yourself, dearest."

"You, too. And don't forget to take your sleeping pill."

"Yes, right away now. Good night."

"Good night."

Alison put the telephone down. She got out of bed, went to the bathroom, took a sleeping pill from the bottle in the medicine cabinet, swallowed the pill, and went back to bed. Calmed by her talk with Nigel, she fell asleep soon and slept dreamlessly.

She woke, as she always did, even if she had taken a sleeping pill, at 7:30. She saw that a fine rain, hardly more than a heavy mist, was falling. Through it the tall trees in the garden and the house across the street looked spectral. Getting up, she put on her dressing gown and slippers and started downstairs to the kitchen to prepare her mother's morning tea.

Normally, when Alison had done that, she would have returned upstairs, had a bath, dressed, and gone downstairs again to make breakfast. While she was making it, if Nigel were home, he would have had a bath and shaved and dressed, then appeared, in his quiet, brisk way, just after she had taken in her mother's tray. But something about this morning was not normal.

Alison became aware of it as she went down the stairs. Usually, when she went down from the room where she had slept with the window open, she had the feeling of descending into musty, used-up air. All the ground-floor windows would have been closed all night and the smoke of the many cigarettes that Nigel had smoked would have sunk into the carpets and chairs, leaving their staleness behind. Smoking was Nigel's one vice. He was almost a chain-smoker, and although Alison really rather liked this, feeling that it was part of the new masculine element in the house, the first thing she did every morning, even before she had put the kettle on for her mother's tea, was to open most of the windows wide. But this morning there was no staleness to greet her as she reached the hall, and this was not merely because there happened to be no cigarette smoke.

From somewhere a sharp cold draft was blowing in.

She wondered if she could have forgotten to close a window the night before. But she remembered having made her usual rounds and was sure that she had closed them all. However, an unfamiliar chill was coming in from somewhere, and her nerves responded to it, even before she had started to puzzle about it consciously, with an odd little chill of apprehension.

She looked into the sitting room. The windows there were shut as usual. She went into the kitchen and saw that the window was closed and the back door safely locked and bolted. And in the kitchen she did not feel the draft. So perhaps, she thought, the feeling of it brushing damply against her had been her imagination, another symptom of the unease she felt whenever Nigel was away.

Filling the kettle, she put it on the gas, put an embroidered cloth on her mother's tray, set out the delicate little Crown Derby tea set that her mother had used for as long as Alison could remember, brewed the tea, took it to her mother's room, and opened the door.

The tray crashed from Alison's hands. She began to scream and scream.

At first she did not know she was screaming. She only felt possessed by a shattering force that tore at her in a terrible way, brutally rending something out of her. When she realized that it was she who was screaming, that it was she who was making the horrible sounds she could now hear, she stopped and stood silent except for the wheezing of her long shuddering gulps for breath.

The fine china lay in fragments on the floor beneath her. The steaming tea was staining the carpet. She felt absurdly guilty and frightened, as if she were certain to be punished for it. At the same time she stared and stared at the bed where her mother lay.

The odd thing was that Alison had often imagined something like this. She had often thought that one day she might come into the room and find her mother dead. Sometimes she had even wished for it. But in her mind the scene had always been peaceful and orderly, one over which it would have been decent and easy to mourn quietly, one which she could greet with sober grief. Death had always had dignity.

She had not thought of open, wildly staring eyes, or of a mouth stretched wide, as if still in the midst of a soundless shriek for help, or of blood blackened down the side of a terrified old face and over the pillow. She had not thought of a broken window with the dripping cold of the wet morning streaming into the room, and through it to the rest of the house, and of drawers pulled out and their contents thrown everywhere, as if in some special violence against the harmless stockings and gloves and scarfs.

Among them lay her mother's jewel case, broken open and empty.

That jewel case had been a very important object in Mrs. Harley's life, a source of power. Its contents could be promised to Alison, and then the promise could be withdrawn. Occasionally too, when for some reason affection had stirred in the old woman's mind, she had called Alison to her and almost as if to make up to her for something had given her a gift out of the case, a brooch, a pendant, a bracelet, saying, "Here, you may as well have this now as later. I'll never wear it again."

They had always been little things, these gifts, almost the sort of trinkets you might give to a child. Alison had scorned them as much as she had been grateful for them. She had often thought that her mother would never wear her rubies again either, or her pearls or the diamond sunburst, and to have had these beautiful and valuable things at least to finger upstairs in privacy, even if there would never be any occasion to go out in them, would have given Alison a great deal of pleasure. Now, seeing the ravished case, all the rubies, pearls, and diamonds gone, Alison was startled by the stab of vengeful satisfaction that she felt.

Just for an instant she seemed to feel a shameful sort of delight that her mother had lost her life for the sake of the jewels she had hoarded, and which were no financial loss to Alison now, since of course they were fully insured. Yet only a moment later she could not believe she had ever had such a feeling. She was a good daughter. She always had been. And what a good daughter felt now was only pity and grief. And it was her duty to summon the police as quickly as possible.

Walking backward, as if leaving the presence of royalty, Alison withdrew from the room, her gaze held hypnotized by the dead face on the bed. But all of a sudden she turned and ran, feeling that she might start screaming again if she did not get out of sight of the staring, empty eyes. She plunged into the sitting room and threw herself, shuddering, in the chair beside the table on which the telephone stood.

You dialed 999 on occasions like this, didn't you?

Her hand went out to the telephone. Then it dropped slowly down on her lap and lay there, first twitching, then motionless.

She had just seen something which she did not understand. Something which puzzled her very much indeed. Because her mind seldom worked quickly, and was even slower than usual at the moment, numb and confused as it was by shock, she did not know why this thing seemed so important. It was something she

had often seen before, if not always in that place. She had got used to seeing it and to not making a fuss about it, even though it slightly offended her.

It was just a little heap of cigarette ashes on the carpet beside the chair in which she was sitting.

For all the neatness of his habits, Nigel, the chain-smoker, was always forgetting to knock the ashes off his cigarette into an ashtray. Alison had often sat uneasily watching as the ashes grew long and feathery and finally dropped onto his jacket, or the arm of his chair, or the floor. And there was one of those little heaps now.

But last night she had run the vacuum cleaner over that spot. She knew she had. She remembered pulling the chair out to clean under it as well as all round it and there had been no ashes there when she had finished. There should be none now.

Her shuddering stopped as she began to think about what this meant.

The odd thing was that she found herself thinking with unusual lucidity. Her thoughts seemed to be forming in a hard white light. There was no vagueness about them for once. They were linked together by simple logic.

Nigel, she thought, had sat here in this chair last night *after* she had finished cleaning the carpet. That was obvious. He had sat *here* to telephone. He had talked to her on the telephone. Yet he could not have rung her up from here. He could not by any means have called the extension upstairs from here. So it must have been Christopher who had telephoned from London and asked the exchange for a reversed-charges call.

But Nigel had been waiting here in this room, waiting for the call to come through. His car had been in the garden, invisible from the road and the house among the shrubs and tall trees. And as soon as the bell had rung, he had snatched up the telephone, just as she had done upstairs, and so had been able to speak to her, while Christopher, in London, had listened in silence.

And while Nigel had been waiting here, he had smoked as usual, the ashes from his cigarette growing long and dribbling onto the floor, probably without his being aware of it. But even if he had noticed, it would not have worried him, for he could not have known that the last thing Alison had done before going up to bed was to vacuum the carpet.

The call had purposely been made late so that he could be sure

she would be in bed when it came through. He had spoken as tenderly as usual and had reminded her to take her sleeping pill. Then he had probably listened to her going to the bathroom to take the pill and had heard her return to the bedroom. He would have waited a while to give the pill time to act and then he set about cold-bloodedly murdering her mother.

The broken window and the rifled jewel case had of course been blinds, to make the crime look like a case of simple robbery. The truth was that the jewels were a mere drop in the ocean to what Nigel had been after, had been after ever since he first met Alison and heard that she was rich old Mrs. Harley's only relative. As so often, Mrs. Harley had been cruelly right.

And hadn't Alison really known it all along?

What she did not know was that she had become quite rigid in her chair. She looked as if she were in a trance. Her mind, with its cool logic, seemed to be at work outside her body. More than she had ever felt before, it seemed to her that she did not actually exist, that she was not really here in this familiar sitting room. That she was only an illusion, a lost spirit, wandering in the wastes of a ghastly dreamland.

And Nigel, of course, had never existed either. The gentle and loving man to whom she had given her timorous heart had been her own invention. He had never been real. It had not been merely when he was out of her sight that he had no identity; he had never, never, had identity.

The minutes passed. Alison had almost forgotten her mother and what had happened to her. But at last she gave a little sigh and relaxed. She pushed her hair back from her face. Her forehead was moist and her fingers were very cold.

She looked thoughtfully at the little heap of ashes on the carpet. Such a little heap. A policeman's shoe could easily flatten it. It could disappear, and then how could anyone know that Nigel had not been in London with Christopher, had not been telephoning from the London flat? There would be the record of a reversed-charges call, made from that flat. It would be Alison's word against those of the Arkell brothers. And a wife—hadn't she heard that somewhere?—was not permitted to give evidence against her husband.

But what was there to stop her from manufacturing a little more evidence?

Reaching out to the box of cigarettes on the table, Alison took a

cigarette, put it tentatively between her lips, lit it with the heavy silver table-lighter, and drew smoke into her lungs. She coughed, then choked helplessly. The room swam. She had smoked only once before in her life. It had been years ago, when she had been a young woman at a dance and her partner had persuaded her to try a cigarette. Anxious to please, she had smoked it from beginning to end. But deciding that she did not like it, she had never smoked again. Now she smoked on steadily. She looked as dedicated to the act of smoking as she ever had been to anything.

When the ashes grew long, she let them fall close to the ashes already on the carpet. She let some more grow, and let them fall. Presently, when the cigarette was more than half smoked, she decided that there were enough ashes there to make it impossible for anyone to overlook them. It would be a mistake to overdo things. She would describe to the police, of course, how she had thoroughly vacuumed the carpet before going to bed and how she could not possibly have missed all those ashes. How did she think they had got there? How indeed? But now it was time to stop and to destroy what was left of the cigarette.

She took it to her mother's ground-floor bathroom and flushed it down the drain.

She was quite cool. In a curious way she had enjoyed smoking the cigarette. It was wonderful, really, how much she had enjoyed it.

Returning to the sitting room she picked up the telephone and dialed 999.

"Police . . . Please, can you come at once? A terrible thing has happened."

Sometime, she thought, when all the inevitable fuss was over, when she was avenged and free, she might take up smoking . . .

"Q"

Ellery Queen

The Broken T

In which Ellery finds the "needle in the haystack" . . .

**Detectives: ELLERY QUEEN and
INSPECTOR QUEEN**

Saturday, 11:55 p.m.—Angie, not happily, turned into her street.

It was one of those dead-end streets on the far side of midtown Manhattan made up of equal parts of warehouses, garages, renovated pre-1901 apartment buildings, and darkness. Lots of darkness.

Tonight the street wore a more sinister look than usual, which Angie blamed on the second feature she had just seen. The film, in explicit Spectracolor, had been a continuous horror of bile-green creatures pursuing a heroine of stainless steel nerve. How could any girl be so *brave*? Angie thought, cringing as she hurried into her unlit vestibule.

And screamed.

The scream came out a mumbly squawk, because a large spongy hand smelling of after-shave lotion and gun oil had leaped out of the dark and attached itself to her mouth. Two other hands—and that makes a pair of the beasts, the bookkeeping division of Angie's brain recorded automatically—yanked her arms up behind her back and pushed.

"Whoa, bossie," gargled the pusher, still pushing. His breath sprayed sheer garlic.

"Hmmm gggngle mmmffle," Angie said through the pain, offering to surrender the \$9.63 in her purse. But it seemed that was not it at all. For Garlic Breath breathed, "You sure she's the Lawton broad?"; and a light exploded in her eyes and Lilac-and-Gun-Oil's voice replied, "Sure I'm sure. I studied her pitchers in the papers"; whereupon Garlic Breath said with chilling relish, "Then awayyyyy we go!"; and the light went out, leaving Angie in Spec-

tricolor blindness and the horrid knowledge that this was no routine mugging after all.

The gears in her comptometer kept whirring as the pair dragged her out to a purring car, shoved her in headfirst, blindfolded her with something that smelled like a shoeshine rag, threw her on the car floor face down, and then one of them seated himself above her and dug his shoes into strategic sections of her anatomy as the other got behind the wheel and drove them away.

Angie knew now what it was all about. It had to have something to do with the City Licensing Authority bribery scandal and the trial of the indicted Commissioner scheduled to begin on Monday morning.

She prayed briefly for the inhuman movie heroine's courage—which, being merely human, Angie knew she possessed in merely human quantity. But at the same time—for of such is the kingdom of bookkeepers—she found herself counting.

Sunday, 9:10 A.M.—“How much of a beating did they give the girl?” Ellery asked Inspector Queen as they waited outside the hospital room for the district attorney to come out.

“Not enough to show and more than plenty to make their point,” scowled his father. “A real pro work-over, Ellery. Now she’s too scared to testify. Maybe you can do something.”

According to the Inspector’s briefing, CLA clerk-typist-bookkeeper Angela Lawton, 23, blonde, and pretty—upon whose testimony the City of New York was mainly relying for the conviction of the corrupt Commissioner—had been seized the night before by two men, driven blindfolded to an apartment somewhere, scientifically beaten, threatened with the destruction of her prettiness by acid if she testified on Monday, and dumped unconscious on her doorstep in the early hours of Sunday morning, where she was found by a prowler.

The job had clearly been the work of musclemen in the defendant’s behalf; but the girl had not once glimpsed the thugs’ faces, and the chances of connecting the assault with the man going on trial seemed approximately zero.

“So there goes the D.A.’s case,” said Inspector Queen, “unless we can get her to change her mind. Any luck, Herman?” he asked as the district attorney came out of the hospital room. The D.A. shook his head wanly and plodded away.

“Well, let’s try ours,” said Ellery, and they went in.

The girl was lying on the hospital bed like a stick.

"Now understand, Miss Lawton, nobody's blaming you one little bit," Ellery said tenderly, taking her hand. "A beating from professionals is a hard argument to top. But suppose we catch those men—make them talk, put them away. Then you'll have nothing to be afraid of, and you can testify. Right?"

The cold little hand tried to withdraw; tenderly, Ellery held on to it. "It's a big suppose, Mr. Queen. How are you going to catch them? I have no idea where they took me except that—"

"I know, you hurt all over," crooned Ellery as Angie stopped to wince. "Except that what?"

"—that wherever it is, it's across the street from a window with a neon sign in it. The blindfold slipped once while they were slamming me around, and before they could tighten it again I saw the sign flashing on and off in the dark. One neon sign—in the whole city of New York!"

"Pretty big odds," Inspector Queen said, showing his dentures in what he intended as a smile. "By the way, what did the sign say, Miss Lawton? Oh, and what color was it?"

"Pinkish red. And the sign said EAT, in capital letters. How many of *those* do you suppose there are?"

"Hundreds, thousands," Ellery said. "Though neon signs do often become defective, Angie—you don't mind if I call you Angie? Did you happen to notice any imperfections in the letters?"

"There was a break in one of them," said Angie with a faint show of interest. "The T had an unlit gap, sort of. In the middle of the upright."

"E-A-broken T." Ellery beamed. "Across the street, you say. Oh, how about the drive over there? Did they drive fast?"

Angela's lip curled. "Think they'd take a chance on being stopped for a traffic violation? I paid particular attention to *that*. They didn't once exceed the speed limit. You can tell from the way it feels—at least, I can."

"I'll bet you can," said Ellery sincerely. "Though it's too bad you can't also tell us how long the drive took—"

"Oh, can't I," snapped Angie. "I know *exactly*. The moment the car started off I began to count in my head. At one-second intervals. I'm good at that—I practice with clocks for kicks. And of course I held up the count while it stopped for lights."

"Of course," Ellery said; his father was speechless. "Did you—er—stop to pay any tolls?"

"No. I didn't hear a single clink."

Ellery cleared his throat. "So you counted seconds. How many, Angie?"

"My count was 417 seconds for the trip. Allowing for error—say, seven minutes' riding time."

Ellery brought Angie's hand, which was quite warm by this time, to his lips reverently. "God bless your little bookkeeping head. There wouldn't be anything else, Angie, would there?"

Angie frowned. "Well, yes. They had my arms tied to the sides of a chair, but I managed to scratch an X on each side with my nails. But what good is that unless you find the room?"

In the corridor Ellery chortled, "What a girl! This ought to be peach pie, dad. Maximum average speed, say, thirty miles an hour—half a mile a minute. Time in motion, seven minutes. Maximum distance, therefore, three and one-half miles—"

"In any direction," his father pointed out dryly, "including circling back. Which means your three and a half miles could wind up in the next block."

"I'm talking maximums, dad. So that apartment has to be *within* three and a half miles of Angie's door. Figure twenty city blocks to the mile, and that's a radius of seventy blocks."

"In other words, anywhere between the East River and the Hudson east and west, and between—say—Houston Street and the Harlem River south and north." The Inspector sounded unimpressed. "And if your little lady's built-in computer happened to be off, it could be anywhere on Manhattan Island. That's a clue, that is."

"At least we know it's in Manhattan, dad—no tolls, Angie said. We also know the apartment faces a diner or cafeteria. And for that pink neon EAT sign to be visible through the apartment window, the apartment is almost certainly on a ground floor. Once we've found such an apartment, it can be positively identified by those X's Angie scratched on the chair. And that's all there is to it."

"You make it sound so simple," snorted the old man, "All right, Ellery, I'll put every available man on the streets to locate that diner or cafeteria. But you know what I think? I think this is a pipe dream!"

Sunday, 6:15 P.M.—The Inspector proved a prophet. As the last reports straggled in at headquarters, he said kindly, "Not a single

diner or cafeteria in Manhattan with a broken-T EAT sign. So now what, my son?"

"Time," muttered Ellery, wearing a path in the Inspector's floor. "Time! The trial starts in less than sixteen hours... A neon sign with a broken letter—"

His father said, "What's the matter?"

"What's the matter?" screamed Ellery. "I'm an idiot is what's the matter! Not fit to carry that girl's penwiper! Dad, here's what you've got to do:..."

Monday, 5:02 A.M.—So the Inspector did it; and here the Queens stood, on a nondescript Manhattan street in a lightening hour, gazing on a plate-glass window behind which a pinkish red neon sign flashed on and off its 24-hour-a-day message, EAT—with its T broken on the ascender exactly as Angela Lawton had described it.

And following the possible lines of sight across the street, Inspector Queen's men did indeed locate a ground-floor apartment with a view of the EAT sign; and sleeping therein they found a man with hands that smelled of lilac lotion and gun oil, and they showed him the chair with the two scratched-in X's, and the shoe rag with which Angie Lawton had been blindfolded; and this bird was invited to raise his voice in song, which after some encouragement he did; and by 5:37 A.M., they had also flushed the other bird, Garlic Breath, who was unmistakable.

They drove down to the hospital for a glad-happy-joyous session with Angie; thence to the district attorney's office, where the two birds sang a duet; and it all turned out fine, except for the corrupt public servant.

CHALLENGE TO THE READER

*What had Ellery told Inspector
Queen to do?*

Ellery told Inspector Queen to have his men stop looking for a diner or cafeteria and instead... But let Ellery tell it himself:

"Every eating place within the limits of the prescribed area had been covered without turning up a neon sign such as Angie described. Was it possible the sign *didn't* mean what it seemed to say?—that the word was not EAT, but something else?"

"According to Angie, the sign had a defective T. Suppose that was not the only defect in the sign? For instance, you're always running across neon signs with entire letters blacked out. Since it had been night-time, Angie would only see the letters that were lit up. Suppose EAT had a letter missing!

"The likeliest place for a missing letter in E-A-T is at the beginning of the word. Run through the alphabet and you'll find that only one letter, under the circumstances, makes sense—M. So I suggested looking for a defective MEAT sign in the window of a butcher shop; which is where they found it!"



Ed McBain

Eighty Million Eyes

We heartily welcome an 87th Precinct story by Ed McBain—a short novel of modern police procedure in a big-city murder case, with the "regulars" of the 87th Precinct doing their job—including Steve Carella, Meyer Meyer, and Cotton Hawes...

We can't help thinking that changing times have forced mathematical changes in detective-story plots. More than a generation ago Ellery Queen wrote *THE AMERICAN GUN MYSTERY* in which a man is murdered during a rodeo being performed in a Madison-Square-Garden-type of metropolitan sports arena—murdered in full view of 40,000 eyes. Thirty years later Ed McBain wrote about a man murdered during the broadcast of a live TV program—murdered in full view of 80,000,000 eyes. Yes, everything—the cost of living, the cost of dying—reveals the spiraling of inflation—including the number of eyewitnesses-to-murder in a detective novel! . . . (Any old-timers remember the work of Cortland Fitzsimmons?—especially his 1931 novel titled *SEVENTY THOUSAND WITNESSES*—that is, 140,000 eyes.)

"Eighty Million Eyes" is one of Ed McBain's most painstaking and interesting short novels—about a murder that baffled and frustrated the detectives of the 87th Precinct, a murder "that seemed to defy all laws of addition and subtraction" . . .

Detectives: 87th PRECINCT HOMICIDE SQUAD

There were days when he felt he owned the entire city.

Winter or summer, fall or spring, the season didn't matter. Leaving the Squad Room and coming down the iron-runged stairway and walking past Sergeant Dave Murchison sitting behind the muster desk, and then down the low flat steps outside the

precinct, with the green globes flanking the doorway, the numerals 87 painted on each globe in white, he became suddenly aware of the city.

All at once the city reached across Grover Park to clutch him in a fierce embrace. Without warning she was there waiting for him as he came down those steps—the sound of her, and the aroma of her, and the blinding evening luminosity of her.

He had watched her that afternoon through the grilled windows of the Squad Room. Sitting at his desk, the windows open only a trifle at the bottom, the tart, fresh air of autumn sweeping into the smoky staleness of the office, Steve Carella had watched the lights in the buildings across the park as, one by one, they intimidated the waning afternoon. The sun had been a pale violet stain on the far horizon, blurring behind the knife-edge silhouettes of apartment houses and hotels, office buildings and factories.

And then the sun vanished completely, leaving its metallic glow in the sky for just an instant longer, and the lights came on, one by one, as if a slightly faulty master switch had been thrown somewhere. He had turned back to the report he was working on and forgot the city. Typing in triplicate left little room for romance.

But now, stepping out into the air, the city reached for him again. He was a tall man, deceptively slender, his slim appearance giving no clue to the sinewy power of his arms and chest. His eyes were brown, slanting downward to combine with his high cheekbones to give his face a peculiarly Oriental look. A grin touched that face as he accepted the city, breathed deeply of the magnificent stench of carbon monoxide fumes, felt his ears jangling to the sound of belching buses and shouting children and peddlers and roller skates, the semisolid *thwunk* of a stickball bat striking a rubber ball.

He took the city's elbow graciously, like a college boy on a prom night, and the grin widened on his face because he knew he owned her: he owned the smell of fallen and decaying leaves in the park across the way, and the magical lights on top of the insurance building that alternately flashed the time and the temperature; he owned jellied apples and Charlotte Russes and sanitation trucks spraying the gutters and a guitar strumming softly somewhere behind a tenement window; he owned the docks and cross streets, the steel, the glass, the concrete, the very air itself.

He hurried home to his wife.

On the north side of the 87th Precinct territory, in a side street off Culver Avenue, in the midst of a slum as rank as a cesspool, there crouched an innocuous-looking brick building which had once served as a furniture loft. It was now magnanimously called a television studio, and it was from this grimy brick building that the Stan Gifford Show originated every Wednesday night of the year, except during the summer hiatus.

It was incongruous to see all the ivy-league, narrow-tied advertising and television men trotting through a slum almost every day of the week in an attempt to put together Gifford's weekly comedy hour. The neighborhood citizens watched the procession of creators with a jaundiced eye; the show had been on the air for three solid years, and they had grown used to seeing these aliens in their midst. There had never been any trouble between the midtown masterminds and the uptown residents, and there probably never would be. A slum has enough troubles without picking on a network.

Besides, most of the people in the neighborhood liked the Stan Gifford Show and would rush indoors the moment it took to the air. If it took all these nuts to put together the show every week, who were they to complain? It was a good show, and it was free besides.

The good show, and the free one, had been rehearsing since the previous Friday in the loft on North Eleventh, and it was now six forty-five p.m. on Wednesday evening, which meant that in exactly one hour and fifteen minutes a telop would flash in homes across the continent announcing the Stan Gifford Show to follow, and then there would be a station break with commercial, and then the introductory theme music, and then organized bedlam would once again burst forth from approximately 20,000,000 television sets.

The network, gratuitously giving itself the edge in selling prime time to potential sponsors, estimated that in each viewing home there were at least two people, which meant that every Wednesday night at eight p.m., 80,000,000 eyes would draw a bead on the smiling countenance of Stan Gifford as he waved from the screen and said, "Back for more, huh?"

In the hands of a lesser personality this opening remark—even when delivered with a smile—might have caused many viewers to switch to another channel or perhaps to turn off the set completely. But Stan Gifford was charming, intelligent, and born with an

intuitive sense of comedy. He knew what was funny and what was not, and he could even turn a bad joke into a good one simply by acknowledging its failure with a deadpan nod and a slightly contrite look at his adoring fans. He exuded an ease that seemed totally unrehearsed, a calm that could only be natural.

"Where the hell is Art Wetherley?" he shouted frantically at his assistant director, George Cooper.

"Here just a minute ago, Mr. Gifford," the A.D. shouted back, and then instantly yelled for quiet on the set. The moment of quiet achieved, he broke the silence by shouting, "Art Wetherley! Front and center, on the double!"

Wetherley, a diminutive gag writer who had been taking a smoke on one of the fire escapes, came into the studio, walked over to Gifford and said, "What's up, Stan?"

Gifford was a tall man, with a pronounced widow's peak—he was actually beginning to bald, but he preferred to think of his receding hairline as a pronounced widow's peak—penetrating brown eyes, and a generous mouth. When he smiled, his eyes crinkled up from coast to coast, and he looked like a youthful, beardless Santa Claus about to deliver a bundle of goodies to needy waifs.

But he was not smiling now, and Wetherley had seen the unsmiling Gifford often enough to know that his solemn countenance meant trouble.

"Is this supposed to be a joke?" Gifford asked. He asked the question politely and quietly, but there was enough menace in his voice to blow up an entire city block.

Wetherley, who could be as polite as anyone in television when he wanted to, quietly said, "Which one is that, Stan?"

"This mother-in-law line," Gifford said. "I thought mother-in-law jokes went out with nuclear fission."

"I wish my mother-in-law had gone out with nuclear fission," Wetherley said, and then, instantly realizing that this was not a time for adding one bad joke to another, added, "We can cut it."

"I don't want it cut. I want a substitute for it."

"That's what I meant."

"Then why didn't you say what you meant?" Gifford looked across the studio at the wall clock which was busily ticking off minutes to air time. "You'd better hurry," he said. "Stay away from mothers-in-law and Liz Taylor and astronauts."

"Gee," Wetherley deadpanned, "what does that leave?"

"Some people actually think you're funny—you know that?" Gifford said, and turned and walked away.

The assistant director, who had been standing near one of the booms throughout the entire conversation, sighed and said, "Boy, I hope he calms down."

"I hope he drops dead," Wetherley answered.

Teddy Carella was the most beautiful woman in the world.

"I own the city, do you know that?" Carella said to her.

Teddy raised her eyebrows dubiously and poured more coffee into his cup. He looked up at her and thought *I own the city, and my wife is the most beautiful woman in the world*. He watched as she poured. He said, "You're beautiful," but her head was bent over the coffeepot, and he knew she could not see his lips, knew she had not "heard" his words.

He reached out suddenly, cupped her chin with his hand, and she turned her head curiously. He said again, "You're beautiful," and this time she watched his lips, and this time she saw the words on his mouth, understood them, and nodded.

And then, as if his voice had thundered into her silent world, as if she had been waiting patiently all day long to unleash a torrent of words, she began moving her fingers rapidly in the deaf-mute alphabet.

He watched her hands as they told him of the day's events. Behind the hands her face formed a backdrop, the intense brown eyes adding meaning to each silent word she delivered, the head of black hair cocking suddenly to one side to emphasize a point, the mouth sometimes moving into a pout or a grimace or a sudden radiant smile.

He watched her hands and her face, interpolating a word or a grunt every now and then, sometimes stopping her when she formed a sentence too quickly, and marveling all the while at the wonderful animation she brought to the telling of the simplest story.

When, in turn, she listened, her eyes watched intently, as if afraid of missing a syllable, her face mirroring whatever was being said. Because she never heard the intonations or subtleties of any voice, her imagination supplied emotional content that sometimes wasn't there at all. She could be moved to tears or laughter by a single innocuous sentence; she was like a child listening to a fairy tale, her mind supplying every fantastic, unspoken detail.

As they did the dishes together, their conversation was a curious blend of toilet training and petty larceny, problems with the butcher and the lineup.

Carella kept his voice low. Volume meant nothing to Teddy, and he knew the twins were asleep in the other room. There was a hushed warmth to that kitchen, as if it gently echoed a city that was curling up for the night.

In ten minutes' time, in 20,000,000 homes, 40,000,000 people would turn 80,000,000 eyes on a smiling Stan Gifford who would look out at the world and say, "Back for more, huh?"

Carella, who didn't ordinarily enjoy watching television, had to admit that he was one of those 40,000,000 hopeless, unwashed addicts who turned to Gifford's channel every Wednesday night. Unconsciously, he kept one eye on the clock as he dried the dishes. For whatever perverse reasons he derived great pleasure from Gifford's taunting opening statement, and he would have felt cheated if he'd tuned in too late to hear it.

His reaction to Gifford surprised even himself. He found most television a bore. The Westerns were simply clichéd kitchen-sink dramas in Levis and Stetsons. The situation comedies were all situation and no comedy. And the detective shows—

In a fit of anger he had once written a letter to one of the networks. He had used official Police Department stationery, and he had tried valiantly and unsuccessfully to disguise the intensity of his feelings, lest he be considered just another crank. The letter had gone on for two closely typed pages.

He'd never mailed it, but neither had he watched a detective show on television again.

He found, too, that Teddy derived little if any pleasure from watching the home screen. She was perfectly capable of reading the lips of a performer when the director deigned to show him in a close shot. But whenever an actor turned his back or moved into a long shot she lost the thread of the story and began asking Carella questions. Trying to watch her moving hands and the screen at the same time was an impossible task. He had decided the hell with it.

Except for Stan Gifford.

At three minutes to eight that Wednesday night Carella turned on the television set and then made himself comfortable in an easy chair. Teddy opened a book and began reading. He watched the final moments of the show immediately preceding Gifford's (a

fat lady won a refrigerator), and then read the telop stating "Stan Gifford is next," and then watched the station break and commercial (a very handsome, dark-haired man was making love to a cigarette with each ecstatic puff he took).

Then there was a slight pause, and Gifford's theme music started.

"Okay if I turn this light a little lower?" Carella asked. Teddy, her nose buried in her book, did not see him speak. He touched her hand gently and she looked up. "Okay to dim this light?" he asked again, and she nodded just as Gifford's face filled the screen.

The smile broke like thunder over Mandalay.

"Back for more, huh?" Gifford said, and Carella burst out laughing and then turned down the lights. The single lamp behind Teddy's chair cast a warm glow over the room. Directly opposite it, the colder light of the electronic tube threw a bluish rectangle on the floor directly beneath it. Gifford walked to a table, sat, and immediately went into a monologue, his customary manner of opening the show.

"I was talking to Julius the other day," he said, and the line, for some curious reason, brought a laugh from the studio audience as well as Carella. "He's got a persecution complex, I'll swear to it. An absolute paranoiac." Another laugh. "I said to him, 'Look, Julie . . .' I call him Julie because, after all, we've known each other for a long time. Some people say I'm almost like a son to him. 'Look, Julie,' I said to him, 'what are you getting all upset about? So a lousy soothsayer stops you on the way to the forum and gives you a lot of baloney about the Ides of March? Why do you let this upset you, huh? Julie baby, the people *love* you.'

"Well, he adjusted this little laurel wreath he wears on the back of his head—he's going bald you know, that's why he wears it. It's an awful bother, to tell you the truth, because everybody in town's starting to imitate the style, and those laurel leaves pinch the back of your neck. Besides, you've got to put them in water every night or they begin to wilt. Julie has his made up fresh every day, but he's the boss and he chalks it off to expenses.

"Anyway, he adjusted his wreath the way he always does when he's going to make a speech, like that time he was trying to explain to the Senate why he spent such a long time in Egypt—but that's another story. He adjusted his wreath and started carrying on about Cassius, about how he was looking lean and hungry and

all that. I tried to explain that Cassius was dieting again, but Julie wasn't buying it. He turned to me, and he said, 'Brutus, I know you think I'm being foolish, but . . .'"

And that's the way it went. For ten solid minutes Gifford held the stage alone, pausing only to garner his laughs or to deliver his contrite look when a joke fell flat. At the end of the ten minutes he introduced his dance ensemble, who held the stage for another five minutes. He then paraded his first guest, a buxomy Hollywood blonde who sang a torch song and did a skit with him, and before anyone at home realized it, the first half of the show was over. Then station break, commercial.

Carella got a bottle of beer from the refrigerator and settled down to enjoy the remaining half hour.

Gifford came on to introduce a group of folk singers who sang *Greensleeves* and *Scarlet Ribbons*, a most colorful combination. He walked onto the stage again as soon as they were finished, and then went to work in earnest.

His next guest was a male Hollywood personality. The male Hollywood personality seemed to be somewhat at a loss because he could neither sing nor dance nor, according to some critics, even act. But Gifford engaged him in some very high-priced banter for a few minutes and then personally began a commercial while the visitor went off to change his costume for a promised skit.

Gifford finished the commercial and motioned to someone standing just off camera. A stagehand carried a chair into viewing range. Gifford thanked him with a small bow, and then placed the chair in the center of the enormous, empty stage. He had been on camera for perhaps five minutes now, a relatively short time, and when he sat in the chair and heaved a weary sigh, everyone was a little surprised.

He kept sitting in the chair, saying nothing, doing nothing. There was no music behind him. Carella felt himself beginning to smile because he knew Gifford was about to do one of his pantomimes. He touched Teddy's arm. "The pantomime," he said.

She nodded, put down the book, and looked at the screen.

Gifford continued doing nothing. He simply sat there and looked out at the audience. But he seemed to be watching something in the very far distance. The stage was silent as Gifford kept watching this something in the distance, a something that seemed to be getting closer and closer.

Then suddenly Gifford got out of the chair, pulled it aside, and watched the something as it roared past him. He wiped his brow, faced his chair in another direction, and sat again.

Now he leaned forward. It was coming from the other direction. Closer it came, closer, and again Gifford got up, pulled his chair aside at the last possible moment, and watched the imaginary thing speed past him. He sat again, facing another direction.

Carella burst into laughter as Gifford spotted it coming at him once more. This time he got out of the chair with a determined and fierce look on his face. He held the chair in front of him like a lion tamer, defying the something to attack. But again, at the last moment, he pulled out of the way to let the something go by.

It was now on his left. He turned, whipping the chair around. The camera came in for a tight shot of his perplexed and completely helpless face.

Another look crossed that face.

The camera eye was in tight for the closeup and it caught the sudden faintness that flashed across the puzzled features. Gifford seemed to sway for an instant, and then he put one hand to his eyes, as if he weren't seeing too clearly, as if the something rushing from the left had all at once taken on a real dimension. He squeezed his eyes shut tightly and shook his head, then staggered back several paces and dropped the chair, just as the something streaked by him.

It was all part of the act, of course. Everyone knew that. But somehow, Gifford's pantomime had taken on a reality that transcended humor. Somehow, there was real confusion in his eyes as he watched the nameless something begin another charge.

The camera stayed on him in a tight closeup. Gifford looked directly into the camera and there was a pathetically pleading look on his face. Then contact was made again and the audience began laughing. This was the same sweet and gentle man pursued by a persistent nemesis. This, once more, was comedy.

Carella did not laugh.

Gifford reached down for the chair. The close shot on one camera yielded to a long shot on another camera. His fingers closed around the chair. He righted it, then sat in it weakly, his head drooping. Again the audience howled, but Carella was leaning forward now, watching Gifford with a deadly cold, impersonal, fixed stare.

Gifford clutched his abdomen. His face paled and he seemed in

danger of falling out of the chair. And then, all at once, for all the world to see, he became violently ill. The camera was caught unawares for a moment. It lingered on his helpless sickness an instant longer, then cut away.

Carella stared at the screen as the orchestra struck up a sprightly tune.

There were two squad cars and an ambulance parked in the middle of the street when Detective Meyer Meyer pulled up in front of the loft. Five patrolmen were standing before the single entrance to the building, trying valiantly to keep back the crowd of reporters, photographers, and just plain sightseers who thronged the sidewalk. The newspapermen were making most of the noise, shouting some choice Anglo-Saxon phrases at the policemen who refused to budge.

Meyer got out of the car and looked for Patrolman Genero, who had called the Squad Room not five minutes ago. He spotted him almost at once and then elbowed his way through the crowd, squeezing past an old lady who had thrown a bathrobe over her nightgown. "I beg your pardon, ma'am," he said, then, shoving a fat man smoking a cigar, "Would you mind getting the hell out of my way?"

He finally reached Genero, who stood guarding the entrance doorway.

"Boy, am I glad to see you!"

"I'm glad to see you, too," Meyer answered. "Did you let anyone get by?"

"Only Gifford's doctor and the people from the hospital."

"Who do I talk to in there?"

"The producer of the show. His name's David Krantz. Meyer, it's bedlam. You'd think God dropped dead."

"Maybe he did," Meyer said patiently, and entered the building.

The promised bedlam started almost at once. There were people on the iron-runged stairways, and people in the corridor, and they all seemed to be saying exactly the same thing.

Meyer cornered a bright-eyed young man wearing thick-lensed spectacles and said, "Where do I find David Krantz?"

"Who wants to know?"

"Police," Meyer said wearily.

"Oh. He's upstairs. Third floor."

"Thanks," Meyer said patiently.

If there was one virtue Meyer possessed, it was patience. He was grateful for this singular quality to his father, Max Meyer, who had been somewhat startled 38 years ago to learn that his wife was going to have a baby. Max, a practical joker in his own right, thought this was the practical joke supreme—an impending baby when he was already thinking of old-age homes and community burial plots.

He had awaited the birth of his child with mixed emotions. When the baby was born, he promptly pulled the rug out from under him. He decided to name the child Meyer. This, when coupled with the surname Meyer, produced the somewhat redundant, but certainly euphonic Meyer Meyer.

It's not nice to play practical jokes; it's even worse to *be* a practical joke. The young Meyer Meyer, an Orthodox Jew being raised in a predominantly Gentile neighborhood, learned that his name was a source of unbridled merriment to the kids living on his block. If they needed a reason for beating him up, the name provided a handy excuse. "Meyer Meyer, Jew on fire!" they would shout, and then proceed to send him home in tatters.

Meyer learned patience. Patiently he forgave the vagaries of change-of-life birth. Patiently he forgave his comical father. Patiently he even learned to forgive the little monsters who regularly ganged up on him—but only after he had caught one alone and been allowed to slug it out toe to toe in single-handed and ecstatically victorious combat.

Eventually his father's practical joke was forgotten. Happily it left no scars on Meyer Meyer the man—unless one chose to notice that he was only 37 years old and totally bald.

Patiently he stopped a girl in a black leotard. "I'm looking for David Krantz."

"Straight ahead," the girl answered. "The man with the mustache."

The man with the mustache was in the center of a circle of people standing under a bank of hanging lights. At least five other girls in black leotards, two dozen more in red-spangled dresses, and a variety of men in suits, sweaters, and work clothes, were standing in small clusters around the wide expanse of the studio floor.

Beyond the knot of men surrounding the man with the mustache, Meyer could see a hospital intern in white talking to a tall man in a business suit. He debated looking at the body first, de-

cided it would be best to talk to the head man.

"Mr. Krantz?"

Krantz turned with an economy and swiftness of movement that were a little startling. "Yes, what is it?" He gave an immediate impression of efficient wastelessness in a vast wasteland.

Meyer, who was pretty quick on the draw himself, immediately flipped open his wallet to his shield.

"Detective Meyer, Eighty-seventh Squad," he said. "I understand you're the producer."

"That's right," Krantz answered. "What now?"

"What do you mean, 'What now?'"

"I mean what are the police doing here?" Krantz asked.

"Just a routine check," Meyer said.

"For a man who died of an obvious heart attack?"

"Well, I didn't know you were a doctor, Mr. Krantz."

"I'm not. But any fool. . . ."

"Mr. Krantz, it's very hot in here and I've been working all day and I'm tired. Don't start bugging me right off the bat. From what I understand—"

"Here we go," Krantz said to the circle of people around him.

"Here we go *where*?" Meyer said.

"If a maiden lady dies of old age in her own bed, every cop in the city is convinced it's homicide."

"Oh? Who told you that?"

"I used to produce a half-hour mystery show. I know the routine."

"And what's the routine?"

"Look, Detective Meyer, what do you want from me?"

"I want you to cut it out, first of all. I'm trying to ask some pretty simple questions about what seems to be an accidental—"

"Seems? See what I mean?" he said to the crowd.

"Yeah, *seems*, Mr. Krantz. And you're making it pretty difficult. Now if you'd like me to get a subpoena for your arrest, we can talk it over at the station house. It's up to you."

"Now you're kidding. You've got no grounds for arresting me."

"Try Section one-eight-five-one of the Penal Law," Meyer said flatly. "'Resisting public officer in the discharge of his duty: a person who, in any case or under any circumstances not otherwise specially provided for, willfully resists, delays, or obstructs a public officer—'"

"All right, all right," Krantz said. "You've made your point."

"Then get rid of your 'yes' men, and let's talk."

The crowd dispersed without a word.

In the distance, Meyer could see the tall man arguing violently with the intern in white. He turned his full attention to Krantz and said, "I thought the show had a studio audience."

"It does."

"Well, where are they?"

"We put them upstairs. Your patrolman said it was all right."

"I want one of your people to take all their names and tell them to go home."

"Can't one of your patrolmen . . ."

"I've got a madhouse in the street outside, and only five men to take care of it. Would you mind helping me, Mr. Krantz?"

"All right, I'll take care of it."

"Thanks. Now, what happened?"

"He died of a heart attack."

"How do you know? Had he ever had one before this?"

"Not that I know of, but . . ."

"Then let's leave that open for the time being—okay? How long was he on stage when he collapsed?"

"I can get that for you. It must have been about ten minutes," Krantz said.

"I'd like the accurate time."

"Somebody was probably keeping a timetable. Hold it a second. George! Hey George!"

A man wearing a cardigan sweater and talking to one of the dancers turned abruptly at the sound of his name. He peered around owlishly for a moment, obviously annoyed, trying to locate the person who'd called him. Krantz raised his hand in signal, and the man picked up a battery-powered megaphone from the seat of the chair beside him and walked toward the two men.

"This is George Cooper, our assistant director," Krantz said. "Detective Meyer."

Cooper extended his hand cautiously. Meyer realized all at once that the scowl on Cooper's face was a perpetual one, a mixed look of terrible inconvenience and unspeakable injury, as if he were a man trying to think in the midst of a revolution.

"How do you do?" he said.

"Mr. Meyer wants to know how long Stan was on camera."

"What do you mean?" Cooper said. "After the folk singers went off?"

"I guess so. Did somebody keep a record?"

"I can time the tape," Cooper said grudgingly. "Want me to?"

"Please," Meyer said.

"What happened?" Cooper asked. "Is it a heart attack?"

"We don't—".

"What else could it be?" Krantz interrupted.

"Well, I'll run the tape," Cooper said. "You going to be around?"

"I'll be here," Meyer assured him.

Cooper walked away scowling.

"Who's that arguing with the intern over there?" Meyer asked.

"Karl Nelson," Krantz replied. "Stan Gifford's doctor."

"Was he here all night?"

"No. I reached him at home and told him to come over here in a hurry. That was after I'd called the ambulance."

"Get him over here, will you?"

"Sure," Krantz said. He raised his arm and shouted, "Karl!"

Nelson broke away from the intern, turned back to hurl a last word at him, then walked briskly to where Meyer and Krantz were waiting. He was broad as well as tall, with thick, black hair graying at the temples. There was a serious expression on his face as he approached, and a high color in his cheeks.

"That idiot wants to move the body," he said immediately. "I told him I'd report him to the A.M.A. if he did. What do you want, Dave?"

"This is Detective Meyer."

Nelson shook hands briefly and firmly. "Are you getting the medical examiner to perform an autopsy?" he asked.

"Do you think I should, Dr. Nelson?"

"Didn't you see the way Stan died?"

"No. How did he die?"

"It was a heart attack, wasn't it?" Krantz said.

"Don't be ridiculous. Stan's heart was in excellent condition. When I arrived here at about nine o'clock, he was experiencing a wide range of symptoms. Labored respiration, rapid pulse, nausea, vomiting. We tried a stomach pump, but that didn't help at all. He went into convulsion at about nine fifteen. The third convolution killed him at nine thirty."

"What are you suggesting, Dr. Nelson?" Meyer asked.

"I'm suggesting he was poisoned."

- In the phone booth on the third floor landing, Meyer deposited

his dime and then dialed the home number of Lieutenant Peter Byrnes. Byrnes himself answered, his voice sounding fuzzy with sleep.

"Pete, this is Meyer."

"What time is it?" Byrnes asked.

"I don't know. Ten thirty, eleven."

"I must have dozed off. Harriet went to a movie. What's the matter?"

"Pete, I'm investigating this Stan Gifford thing, and I thought I ought to—"

"What Stan Gifford thing?"

"The television guy. He dropped dead on the stage tonight, and—"

"What television guy?"

"He's a big comic."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Anyway, his doctor thinks we ought to have an autopsy done right away. Because he had a convulsion, and—"

"Strychnine?" Byrnes asked.

"I doubt it. He was vomiting before he went into convulsion."

"Arsenic?"

"Maybe. I think the autopsy's a good idea, though."

"Go ahead, ask the M.E. to do it."

"Also, I'm going to need some help on this. I've got some more questions to ask here, and I thought we might get somebody over to the hospital right away. To be there when the body arrives. Get a little action from them."

"That's a good idea."

"Yeah, well, Bert's out on a plant and Cotton was just answering a squeal when I left the office. Could you call Steve for me?"

"Sure."

"Okay, that's all. I'll ring you later."

"What time did you say it was?"

Meyer looked at his watch. "Ten forty-five."

"I must have dozed off," Byrnes said wonderingly, then hung up.

George Cooper was waiting for Meyer when he came out of the booth. The same scowl was on his face.

"I ran that tape," he said.

"Okay."

"I timed it with a stopwatch. What do you want to know?"

"When he came on, how long he stayed, and when he collapsed."

Cooper looked sourly at the pad in his hand and said, "The folk singers went off at eight thirty-seven. Stan came on immediately afterwards. He was on camera with that Hollywood ham for two minutes and twelve seconds. When the guest went off to change, Stan did the coffee commercial. He ran a little over the paid-for minute, actually a minute and forty seconds. He started his pantomime at eight forty-one prime fifty-two. He was two minutes and fifty-five seconds into it when he collapsed."

"And the total time on camera?"

Cooper looked at the pad again. "Seven minutes and seventeen seconds."

"Thanks," Meyer said. "I appreciate your help." He started walking toward the door leading to the studio floor.

Cooper stepped into his path. His eyes met Meyer's and he stared into them searchingly. "Somebody poisoned him, huh?"

"What makes you think that?"

"They're all talking about it out there—saying it was poison."

"That doesn't necessarily make it true, does it?"

"Dr. Nelson says you'll be asking for an autopsy."

"That's right."

"Then you *do* think he was poisoned."

Meyer shrugged. "I don't think anything yet, Mr. Cooper."

"Listen," Cooper said, and his voice dropped to a whisper. "Listen, I—I don't want to get anybody in trouble but before the show tonight, when we were rehearsing—"

He stopped abruptly. He glanced into the corridor. A man in a sports jacket was approaching the hallway, reaching for a package of cigarettes in his pocket.

"Go ahead, Mr. Cooper," Meyer said.

"Skip it," Cooper answered and walked away quickly.

The man in the sports jacket came into the hallway. He nodded briefly to Meyer, put the cigarette into his mouth, and struck a match.

Meyer took out a cigarette of his own, then said, "Excuse me. Do you have a match?"

"Sure," the man said. He was a small man, with piercing blue eyes and a head that sported a crew cut, giving his face a sharp triangular shape. He struck the match for Meyer, shook it out, then leaned back against the wall again.

"Thanks," Meyer said.

"Don't mention it."

Meyer walked to where Krantz was standing with Nelson and the hospital intern. The intern was plainly confused. He had answered an emergency call, and now no one seemed to know what they wanted him to do with the body. He turned to Meyer pleadingly, hoping for someone who would take command of the situation.

"You can move the body," Meyer said. "Take it to the morgue for autopsy. Tell your man one of our detectives'll be down there soon."

The intern left quickly, before anybody could change his mind. Meyer glanced casually toward the corridor, where the man in the sports jacket was still leaning against the wall, smoking.

"Who's that fellow out there in the hallway?" he asked Krantz casually.

"Art Wetherley," Krantz answered. "One of our writers."

"Was he here tonight?"

"Sure," Krantz said.

"All right, who else is connected with the show?"

"Where do you want me to start?"

"I want to know who was here tonight, that's all."

"Why?"

"Oh, Mr. Krantz, *please*. Gifford could have died from the noise alone in this place, but there's a strong possibility he was poisoned. Now, who was here tonight?"

"All right, I was here. And my secretary. And my associate producer, and his secretary. The unit manager, and his secretary. The—"

"Does everybody have a secretary?"

"Not everybody."

"Let me hear the rest."

Krantz folded his arms, and then began reciting: "The director and the assistant director. Two scenic designers, a costume designer, the booking agent, the choral director, the chorus—seventeen people in it—the orchestra conductor, two arrangers, thirty-three musicians, five writers, four librarians and copyists, the music contractor, the dance accompanist, the choreographer, six dancers, the rehearsal pianist, the lighting director, the audio man, two stage managers, twenty-nine engineers, twenty-seven electricians and stagehands, three network policemen, thirty-five

pages, three makeup men, a hair stylist, nine wardrobe people, four sponsor's men, and six guests." Krantz nodded in quiet triumph. "That's who was here tonight."

"What were you trying to do?" Meyer asked. "Start World War Three?"

Paul Blaney, the assistant medical examiner, had never performed an autopsy on a celebrity before. The tag on the corpse's wrist told him, as if he hadn't already been told by Carella and Meyer who were waiting outside in the corridor, that the man lying on the stainless-steel table was Stan Gifford, the television comedian.

Blaney shrugged. A corpse was a corpse, and he was only thankful that this one hadn't been mangled in an automobile accident. He never watched television, anyway. Violence upset him.

He picked up his scalpel. He didn't like the idea of two detectives waiting outside while he worked. The next thing you knew, they'd be coming into the autopsy room with him and giving their opinions on the proper way to hold a forceps. Besides, he rather resented the notion that a corpse, simply because it was a celebrity corpse, was entitled to preferential treatment.

Oh, sure. Detective Meyer had patiently explained that this was an unusual case and likely to attract a great deal of publicity. And yes, the symptoms certainly seemed to indicate poisoning of some sort, but still Blaney didn't like it. It smacked of pressure. A man should be allowed to remove a liver or a set of kidneys in an unhurried way, not with policemen breathing down his neck.

The usual routine was to perform the autopsy, prepare the report, and then send it on to the investigating team of detectives. If a homicide was indicated, it was sometimes necessary to prepare additional reports, which Blaney did whenever he felt like it, more often not. These were sent to Homicide North or South, the Chief of Police, the commander of the detective division, the district commander and the technical police laboratory.

Sometimes—but only when he was feeling in a particularly generous mood—Blaney would call the investigating precinct detective and give him a verbal necropsy report over the phone. But he had never had cops waiting in the corridor before. He didn't like the idea. He didn't like it at all.

Viciously he made his incision.

In the corridor outside, Meyer sat on a bench alongside

one green-tinted wall and watched Carella, who paced back and forth before him like an expectant father. Patiently Meyer turned his head in a slow cycle, following Carella's movement to the end of the short corridor and back again.

"How'd Mrs. Gifford take it?" Carella wanted to know.

"Nobody likes the idea of autopsy," Meyer said. "But I drove out to her house and told her why we were going ahead, and she agreed."

"What kind of woman is she?"

"Why?"

"If someone poisoned him—"

"She's about thirty-eight or thirty-nine, tall, attractive, I guess. It was a little hard to tell. Her mascara was running all over her face." Meyer paused. "Besides, she wasn't at the studio, if that means anything."

"Well, just who *was* at the studio?" Carella asked.

"I had Genero take down all their names before they were released." Meyer paused. "I'll tell you the truth, Steve, I hope this autopsy comes up with a big fat natural cause of death."

"How many people were in the studio?" Carella said.

"Well," Meyer said, "I think we can safely discount the studio audience, don't you?"

"I guess so. How many were in the studio audience?"

"Five hundred and sixty."

"All right, let's safely discount them."

"So that leaves everyone who was connected with the show and present tonight."

"And how many is that?" Carella asked. "Two or three dozen?"

"Two hundred and six people," Meyer said. "If we want to interrogate them all at the same time, we'll have to hire a hall."

The door of the autopsy room opened, and Paul Blaney stepped into the corridor, pulling off a rubber glove the way he had seen doctors do in the movies. He looked at Meyer and Carella sourly, then said, "Well, what is it you'd like to know?"

"Cause of death," Meyer said.

"Acute poisoning," Blaney answered.

"Which poison?"

"What would you guess?"

"You're the toxicologist," Steve said.

"Yes, yes, but you're the detectives."

"He wants to play games," Meyer said. "We're sorry, Blaney,

but we didn't bring our jacks. What killed the man?"

"Did the man have a history of cardiac ailments?" Blaney asked.

"Not according to his doctor."

"Hmmm," Blaney said.

"Well?" Carella said.

"That's very funny because . . . well, I found strophanthin in the small intestines, and I automatically assumed—"

"What's strophanthin?"

"It's a drug similar to digitalis, but much more powerful. Both are used therapeutically in the treatment of cardiac cases."

"How?"

"Digitalis by infusion, or as a tincture, or even in tablet or capsule form."

"And strophanthin?"

"Intravenously or intramuscularly. The normal dose is very small."

"Is it ever given by pill or capsule?"

"I doubt it. It may have been produced as a pill years ago, but it's been replaced by other drugs today. As a matter of fact, I don't know of many doctors who would normally prescribe such a drug."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, whenever there's a rhythmical disturbance or a structural lesion, digitalis is the more commonly prescribed stimulant. But strophanthin—" Blaney shook his head.

"Why not strophanthin?"

"Look, I'm not saying it's *never* used. I'm only saying it's rarely used. A hospital pharmacy may get one call for it in five years. A doctor might prescribe it—oh, if he wanted immediate results. It acts much faster than digitalis." Blaney paused. "Are you sure this man didn't have a cardiac history?"

"Positive." Carella hesitated a moment, then said, "Well, what form does it come in today?"

"An ampule, usually."

"Liquid?"

"Yes, ready for injection. You've seen ampules of penicillin, haven't you? Well, similar to that."

"Does it come in powder form?"

"Well, it comes from a plant called *strophanthus kombé*, and I imagine when the glucoside is purified you'd get a powder, yes."

"What kind of a powder?"

"A white crystalline. But I doubt if any pharmacy, even a hospital pharmacy, would stock the powder. You might find one or two, but it's rare."

"What's the lethal dose of strophanthin?" Carella asked.

"Anything over a milligram is considered dangerous. That's one one-thousandth of a gram. Compare that to the fatal dose of digitalis, which is about two and a half grams, and you'll understand what I mean about power."

"How much would you say Gifford had inside him?"

"I couldn't say exactly. Most of it, of course, had already been absorbed, or he wouldn't have died. It's not easy to recover strophanthin from the organs. It's very rapidly absorbed and easily destroyed. Do you want me to guess?"

"Please guess," Meyer said.

"Judging from the results of my quantitative analysis, I'd say he ingested at least two full grains."

"Is that a lot?" Meyer asked.

"It's only about a hundred and thirty times the lethal dose."

"What!"

"Symptoms would have been immediate," Blaney said. "Nausea, vomiting, and eventually convulsion and death."

The corridor was silent for several moments. Then Carella said, "What do you mean by immediate?"

Blaney looked surprised. "Immediate," he answered. "What else does immediate mean but immediate? After he took the injection—"

"He was on that stage for maybe ten minutes," Carella said, "with the camera on him every second. He certainly didn't—"

"It was exactly seven minutes and seventeen seconds," Meyer corrected.

"Whatever it was, he certainly didn't take an injection of strophanthin."

Blaney shrugged. "The poison could have been administered orally," he said.

"How?"

"Well . . ." Blaney hesitated. "I suppose he could have broken open one of the ampules and then swallowed the contents."

"He didn't. He was on camera. You said the dose was enough to bring on immediate symptoms."

"Perhaps not so immediate if the drug were taken orally. Look, we really don't know very much about the lethal *oral* dose. In

tests with rabbits, forty times the normal intramuscular dose and eighty times the normal intravenous dose have proved fatal when taken by mouth. Rabbits aren't humans."

"But you said Gifford probably had a *hundred and thirty* times the normal dose," Carella said.

"That's my estimate."

"How long would that have taken to bring on symptoms?"

"Minutes."

"How many minutes?"

"Five minutes, perhaps."

"And he was on camera for more than seven minutes. So the poison got into him just before he came on."

"I suppose so."

"What about this ampule?" Meyer said. "Could it have been dumped into something he drank?"

"Yes, it could have."

"Any other way he could have taken the drug?"

"Well," Blaney said, "if he'd got hold of the drug in powder form somehow, I suppose two grains could have been placed in a gelatin capsule."

"What's a gelatin capsule?" Meyer asked.

"You've seen them," Blaney said. "Vitamins, tranquilizers, stimulants—many pharmaceuticals are packaged in gelatin capsules."

"Let's get back to 'immediate' again," Carella said. "How long does it take for one of those capsules to dissolve in the body?"

"I have no idea. Several minutes, I would imagine. Why do you ask that?"

"Well, the capsule would have had to dissolve before the poison could be released, isn't that right?"

"Yes, of course."

"So immediate doesn't always mean immediate, does it? In this case, for example, immediate means *after* the capsule dissolved."

"I just told you it would have dissolved within minutes."

"How many minutes?" Carella asked.

"I don't know. You'll have to check that with the lab."

"We will," Carella said.

When Carella got to the Squad Room the next morning, Meyer was already there, and a note on his desk told him that a man named Charles Mercer at the police laboratory had called.

"Did you call him back?" Carella asked Meyer.

"I just got in a minute ago."

"Let's hope he's got something," Carella said, and dialed the lab. He was told that Mercer had worked the graveyard shift and gone home at eight a.m.

"Who's this?" Carella asked.

"Danny Di-Tore."

"Would you know anything about the tests Mercer ran for us? On some gelatin capsules?"

"Yeah, sure," Di Tore said. "Just a minute. That was some job."

"What'd he find out?"

"Well, to begin with, he had to use a lot of different capsules. They come in different thicknesses, you know. Like all the manufacturers don't make them the same."

"Pick up the extension, will you, Meyer?" Carella said, and then into the phone, "Go ahead, Di Tore."

"And there're also a lot of things that can affect the dissolving speed. Like if a man just ate, his stomach is full and the capsule won't dissolve as fast. If the stomach's empty, you get a speedier dissolving rate."

"Yeah, go ahead."

"It's even possible for one of these capsules to pass right through the system without dissolving at all. That happens with older people sometimes."

"But Mercer ran the tests."

"Yeah, sure. He mixed a batch of five-per-cent solution hydrochloric acid with a little pepsin. To simulate the gastric juices, you know. He poured that into a lot of separate containers and then dropped the capsules in."

"What'd he come up with?"

"Well, he used different brands and also different sizes. They come in different sizes, you know, the higher the number, the smaller the size. Like a four is smaller than a three."

"And what'd he find out?"

"They dissolve at different rates of speed—ten minutes, four minutes, eight minutes, twelve minutes. The highest was fifteen minutes, the lowest three minutes. That's a lot of help, huh?"

"Well, it's not exactly what I—"

"But most of them took an average of about six minutes to dissolve. That gives you something to fool around with, doesn't it?"

"Six minutes, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Thanks a lot, Di Tore. And thank Mercer, will you?"

"Don't mention it. It helped keep him awake."

Carella replaced the phone in its cradle, and turned to Meyer.

"So what do you think?"

"What am I, a straight man? What do I think? What *else* can I think? Whether he drank it or swallowed it, it had to be just before he went on."

"Had to be. The liquid works within seconds, and the capsule takes approximately six minutes to dissolve. He was on for seven."

"Seven minutes and seventeen seconds," Meyer corrected.

"You think he took it knowingly? Suicide maybe?"

"In front of forty million people?"

"Why not? There's nothing an actor likes better than a spectacular exit."

Meyer took a deep breath and said, "Gifford was earning twenty-five grand a week. According to Krantz, he just signed a new contract, and was bringing in fifteen million dollars yearly in advertising revenue. He was happy with the network, and the network was happy with him. He didn't drink or play the horses, he wasn't in debt, he loved his wife, and had no women on the side. He didn't seem despondent—"

"Okay, okay," Carella said.

"Does that add up to a suicide?"

"No, I admit it. Stop badgering me." Carella yawned. "I guess we'll have to find out who was with him just before he went on."

"That should be very simple," Meyer said. "Only two hundred and six people were there last night."

"Let's call your Mr. Krantz. Maybe he'll be able to help us."

Carella dialed the network and asked to talk to David Krantz. The switchboard connected him with a receptionist, who in turn connected him with Krantz's secretary, who told him that Krantz was out, but would he care to leave a message?

Carella asked her to wait a moment, then covered the mouth-piece. "Are we going out to see Gifford's wife?" he asked Meyer.

"I think we'd better," Meyer said.

"Please tell Mr. Krantz he can reach me at Mr. Gifford's home, will you?" Carella said and hung up.

Larksview was perhaps a half hour outside the city, an exclu-

sive suburb that miraculously managed to provide its homé owners with something more than the conventional sixty-by-a-hundred plots. In a time of encroaching land development it was pleasant and reassuring to enter a community of wide rolling lawns, of majestic houses set far back from quiet, winding roads.

Carella had been speculating wildly from the moment they left the city, but he was silent now as they pulled up in front of a pair of stone pillars set on either side of a white gravel driveway. A half dozen men with cameras and another half dozen with pads and pencils were shouting at the two Larksview patrolmen who stood blocking the driveway.

Meyer rolled down the window on his side of the car and shouted, "Break it up there! We want to get through."

One of the patrolmen moved away from the knot of newspapermen and walked over to the car. "Who are you, Mac?" he said to Meyer and Meyer showed him his shield.

"Eighty-seventh Precinct, huh?" the patrolman said. "You handling this?"

"That's right," Meyer said.

"Then why don't you send some of your own boys out on this driveway detail?" he asked.

"What's the matter?" Carella said, leaning over. "Can't you handle a couple of reporters?"

"A couple? You shoulda seen this place ten minutes ago. The crowd's beginning to thin out a little now."

"Can we get through?" Meyer asked.

"Yeah, sure, go ahead. Just run right over them. We'll sweep up later."

Meyer honked the horn and then stepped on the gas pedal. The newspapermen pulled aside hastily, cursing.

"Nice fellas," Meyer said. "You think they'd leave the poor woman alone."

"The way *we're* doing, huh?"

"This is different."

The house was a huge Georgian Colonial, with white clapboard siding and pale green shutters. Either side of the door was heavily planted with big old shrubs that stretched beyond the boundaries of the house to form a screen of privacy for the back acres. The gravel driveway swung past the front door and then turned on itself to head for the road again, detouring into a small parking area to the left of the house before completing its full cycle.

Meyer drove the car into the parking space, pulled up the emergency brake, and got out. Carella came around from the other side of the car, and together they walked over the noisy gravel to the front door. A shining brass bell pull was set in the jamb.

Carella took the knob and yanked it. The detectives waited. Carella pulled the knob again. Again they waited.

"The Giffords have help, don't they?" Carella said, puzzled.

"If you were making a half million dollars a year, wouldn't you have help?"

"I don't know," Carella said. "You're making fifty-five hundred a year, and Sarah doesn't have help."

"We don't want to seem ostentatious," Meyer said. "If we hired a housekeeper, the Commissioner might begin asking me about all that graft I've been taking lately."

"You, too, huh?"

"Sure. Cleared a cool hundred thousand in narcotics alone last year."

"My game's white slavery," Carella said. "I figure to make—"

The door opened.

The woman who stood there was small and Irish and frightened. She peered out into the sunshine and then she said, "Yes, what is it, please?"

"Police Department," Carella said. "We'd like to talk to Mrs. Gifford."

"Oh." The woman looked more distressed than ever. "Oh, yes," she said. "Yes, come in. She's out back with the dogs. I'll see if I can find her. Police, did you say?"

"That's right, ma'am," Carella said. "If she's out back, couldn't we just go around and look for her?"

"I don't know."

"You are the housekeeper?"

"Yes, sir, I am."

"Well, may we walk around back?"

"All right, but—"

"Do the dogs bite?" Meyer asked cautiously.

"No, they're very gentle. Besides, Mrs. Gifford is with them."

They turned away from the door and began walking on the flagstone path leading to the rear of the house. A woman appeared almost the moment they turned the corner of the building. She was coming out of a small copse of birch trees set at the far

end of the lawn—a tall blonde woman wearing a tweed skirt, loafers, and a blue cardigan sweater, looking down at the ground as two golden retrievers ran ahead of her. The dogs saw the detectives almost immediately and began barking. The woman raised her head and her eyes curiously, then hesitated a moment, her stride breaking.

"That's Lydia Gifford," Meyer whispered.

The retrievers were bounding across the lawn in enormous leaps. Meyer watched their approach uneasily. Carella, who was a city boy, and unused to seeing lion cubs racing across open stretches of ground, was certain they would leap at his jugular. He was, in fact, almost tempted to draw his pistol when the dogs stopped some three feet away and began barking in furious unison.

"Shhh!" Meyer said, and stamped his foot on the ground. The dogs, to Carella's immense surprise, turned tail and ran, yelping back to their mistress, who walked directly toward the detectives now, her head high, her manner openly demanding.

"Yes?" she said. "What is it?"

"Mrs. Gifford?" Carella asked.

"Yes?" The voice was imperious.

Now that she was closer, Carella studied her face. The features were delicately formed, the eyes blue and penetrating, the brows slightly arched, the mouth full. She wore no lipstick. Grief seemed to lurk in the corners of those eyes and on that mouth; grief sat uninvited and omnipresent on her face, robbing it of beauty. "Yes?" she said again, impatiently.

"We're detectives, Mrs. Gifford," Meyer said. "I was here last night. Don't you remember?"

She studied him for several seconds, as if in disbelief. The dogs were still barking, courageous now that they were behind her skirts. "Yes, of course," she said at last, and then added, "Hush, boys," to the dogs, who fell silent.

"We'd like to ask you some questions, Mrs. Gifford," Carella said. "I know this is a trying time for you, but—"

"That's quite all right," she answered. "Would you like to go inside?"

"Wherever you say."

"If you don't mind, may we stay out here? The house—I can't seem to—it's open out here, and fresh. After what happened. . . ."

Carella, watching her, had the sudden notion she was acting. A

slight frown creased his forehead. But immediately she said, "That sounds terribly phony and dramatic, doesn't it? I'm sorry. You must forgive me."

"We understand, Mrs. Gifford."

"Do you really?" she asked. A faint, sad smile touched her unpainted mouth. "Shall we sit on the terrace?"

"The terrace will be fine," Carella told her.

They walked across the lawn to where a wide flagstone terrace sprawled from the rear doors of the house, open to the woods alive with autumn color. There were white wrought-iron chairs and a glass-topped table on the terrace.

Lydia Gifford pulled a low white stool from beneath the table and sat. The detective pulled up chairs opposite her, sitting higher than Lydia, looking down at her. She turned her face up pathetically, and again Carella had the feeling that this, too, was carefully staged, that she had deliberately placed herself in a lower chair so that she would appear defenseless.

On impulse Carella said, "Are you an actress, Mrs. Gifford?"

Lydia looked surprised. The blue eyes opened wide for a moment, then she smiled the same wan smile and said, "I used to be. Before Stan and I were married."

"How long ago were you married, Mrs. Gifford?"

"Six years."

"Do you have any children?"

"No."

Carella nodded. "Mrs. Gifford," he said, "we're primarily interested in learning about your husband's behavior in the past few weeks. Did he seem despondent or overworked or troubled by anything?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Was he the type of man who confided things to you?"

"Yes, we were very close."

"And he never mentioned anything that was troubling him?"

"No. He seemed very pleased with the way things were going."

"What things, Mrs. Gifford?"

"The show, the new stature he'd achieved in television. He'd been a night-club comic before the show went on the air, you know."

"I didn't know that."

"Yes. Stan started in vaudeville many years ago and then drifted into night-club work. He was working in Vegas, as a mat-

ter of fact, when they approached him to see if he'd do the television show."

"And it's been on the air how many years now?"

"Three years."

"How old was your husband, Mrs. Gifford?" Carella wanted to know.

"Forty-eight," she said unhésitatingly.

"And how old are you?"

"Thirty-seven."

"Was this your first marriage?"

"Yes."

"Your husband's?"

"Yes."

"I see. Would you say you were happily married, Mrs. Gifford?"

"Yes. Extremely."

"Mrs. Gifford," Carella said flatly, "do you think your husband committed suicide?"

Without hesitation Lydia said, "No."

"You know he was poisoned?"

"Yes."

"If you don't think he killed himself, you must think—"

"I think he was murdered. Yes."

"Who do you think murdered him, Mrs. Gifford?"

"I think—"

"Excuse me, ma'am," the voice said from the opened French doors leading to the terrace. Lydia turned. Her housekeeper stood there apologetically. "It's Dr. Nelson, ma'am."

"On the telephone?"

"No, ma'am. He's here."

"Oh." Lydia frowned. "Well, ask him to join us, won't you?" She said immediately, "Again."

"What?"

"He was here last night. Came over directly from the show. He's terribly worried about my health. He gave me a sedative and then called twice this morning."

She folded her arms across her knees—a slender, graceful woman who somehow made the motion seem awkward. Carella watched her in silence for several moments. The terrace was still. On the lawn one of the dogs began barking at a bird.

"You were about to say, Mrs. Gifford?" Steve prodded.

Lydia looked up. Her thoughts seemed to be elsewhere.

"We were discussing your husband's alleged murder."

"Yes. I was about to say that I think Karl Nelson killed him."

Dr. Karl Nelson came onto the terrace not two minutes after Lydia had spoken his name, going first to her and kissing her on the cheek, and then shaking hands with Meyer, whom he had met the night before.

He was promptly introduced to Carella, and he acknowledged the introduction with a firm hand clasp and a repetition of the name, "Detective Carella," with a slight nod and a smile, as if he wished to imprint it on his memory. He turned immediately to Lydia then, and said, "How are you?"

"I'm fine, Karl," she said. "I told you that last night."

"Did you sleep well?"

"Yes."

"This has been very upsetting," Nelson said. "I'm sure you gentlemen can understand."

Carella nodded. He was busy watching the effect that Nelson seemed to be having on Lydia. She had visibly withdrawn from him the moment he stepped onto the terrace, folding her arms across her chest, hugging herself as though threatened by a strong wind. The pose was assuredly a theatrical one, but it seemed genuine, nonetheless. If she was not actually frightened of this tall man with the deep voice and the penetrating brown eyes, she was certainly suspicious of him, and the suspicion forced her to turn inward.

"Was the autopsy conducted?" Nelson asked Meyer.

"Yes, sir."

"May I ask what the results were? Or are they classified?"

"Mr. Gifford was killed by a large dose of strophanthin," Carella said.

"Strophanthin?" Nelson looked honestly surprised. "That's rather unusual."

"Are you familiar with the drug?"

"Yes, of course. That is, I know of it. I don't think I've ever prescribed it, however. It's rarely used, you know."

"Dr. Nelson, Mr. Gifford wasn't a cardiac patient, was he?"

"No. I believe I told that to Detective Meyer last night. Certainly not."

"He wasn't taking digitalis or any of the related glucosides?"

"No, sir."

"What was he taking?"

"What do you mean?"

"Was he taking any drugs?"

Nelson shrugged. "No. Not that I knew of."

"Well, you're his personal physician. If anyone *would* know, it'd be you—isn't that so?"

"That's right. No. Stan wasn't—oh, just a moment."

"Yes?"

"Of course, that's not a drug."

"What's not a drug, Dr. Nelson?"

"The vitamins."

"What vitamins?"

"B-complex with Vitamin C."

"How long had he been taking them?"

"Oh, several months. He was feeling a little tired, rundown, you know. I suggested he try them."

"You prescribed them?"

"Prescribed them? No." Nelson shook his head. "He was taking a brand called PlexCin, Mr. Carella. It can be purchased at any drug store without a prescription. But I suggested it to him."

"You suggested this specific brand?"

"Yes. It's manufactured by a reputable firm, and I've found it to be completely reliable—"

"Dr. Nelson, how are these vitamins packaged?"

"In a capsule. Most vitamins are."

"How large a capsule?"

"An O capsule, I would say. Perhaps a double O."

"Dr. Nelson, would you happen to know whether or not Mr. Gifford was in the habit of taking his vitamins during the show?"

"Why, no, I . . ." Nelson paused. He looked at Carella, then turned to Lydia, then looked at Carella again. "You certainly don't think . . ." Nelson shrugged. "But then, I suppose anything's possible."

"What were you thinking, sir?"

"That perhaps someone substituted the strophanthin for the vitamins," the doctor mused.

"Would that be possible?"

"I don't see why not," Nelson said. "The PlexCin capsule is an opaque gelatin that comes apart in two halves. I suppose someone could conceivably have opened the capsule, removed the vitamins, and replaced them with strophanthin. But that would seem an awfully long way to go to—" He stopped.

"To *what*, Dr. Nelson?"

"Well—to murder someone."

The terrace was silent again.

"Did he take these vitamin capsules every day?" Carella asked.

"Yes," Nelson answered.

"Would you know *when* he took them yesterday?"

"No."

"I know when," Lydia Gifford said.

Carella turned to her. She was still sitting on the low stool, still hugging herself, still looking chilled and lost.

"When?" Carella asked.

"He took one after breakfast yesterday morning." Lydia paused.

"I met him for lunch in town yesterday afternoon. He took another capsule then."

"What time was that?"

"Immediately after lunch. I'd say about two o'clock."

Carella sighed.

"What is it, Mr. Carella?" Lydia Gifford asked.

"I think my partner is beginning to hate clocks," Meyer said.

"What do you mean?"

"You see, Mrs. Gifford, it takes six minutes for one of those capsules to dissolve, releasing whatever's inside it. And strophantin acts immediately."

"Then the capsule he took at lunch couldn't have contained any poison."

"That's right, Mrs. Gifford. He took it at two o'clock, and he didn't collapse until about eight forty-five. That's a time span of almost seven hours. The poison *had* to be taken while he was at the studio." Meyer paused. "Which brings us right back to the big question: who was with him before he went on?"

Nelson looked thoughtful for a moment. "You shouldn't have too much difficulty—" he began, and stopped speaking abruptly because the telephone inside was ringing furiously.

David Krantz was matter-of-fact, businesslike, and brief. His voice fairly crackled over the telephone wire.

"You called me, Mr. Carella?"

"Yes."

"How's Lydia?"

"She seems fine."

"You didn't waste any time getting over there, did you?"

"We try to do our little jobs," Carella said drily, remembering

Meyer's description of his encounter with Krantz.

"What is it you want?" Krantz said. "This phone hasn't stopped ringing all morning. Every newspaper in town, every magazine, every cretin in this city wants to know exactly what happened last night! How do I know what happened?"

"You were there, weren't you?"

"I was up in the control booth. I only saw it on the monitor. What do you want, Mr. Carella? I'm very busy."

"I want to know exactly where Stan Gifford was last night before he went on camera."

"How do I know where he was? I just told you I was up in the control booth."

"Where does he usually go when he's off camera, Mr. Krantz?"

"That depends on how much time he has before he's back on."

"Suppose he had the time it took for some folk singers to sing two songs?"

"Then I imagine he went to his dressing room."

"Can you check that for me?"

"Who do you want me to check it with? Stan's dead."

"Look, Mr. Krantz, are you trying to tell me that in your well-functioning, smoothly oiled organization of two hundred and six people—"

"Two hundred people," Krantz corrected. "Six were guests."

"—nobody had any idea where Stan Gifford was while those singers were on camera?"

"I didn't say that."

"What did you say? I'm sure I misunderstood you."

"I said I didn't know. I was up in the control booth. I went up there about fifteen minutes before air time."

"All right, Mr. Krantz, thank you. You've successfully established your alibi. I assume that Gifford did not come up to the control booth at any time during the show?"

"Exactly."

"Then you couldn't have poisoned him. Is that your point?"

"I wasn't trying to establish an alibi. I simply—"

"Mr. Krantz, who would know where Gifford was? Would anybody in your organization know?"

"Yes."

"Who, Mr. Krantz?"

"Our assistant director. He's the person responsible for making sure everyone's in on cue."

"And his name?"

"George Cooper."

"And his address?"

"He lives downtown in the Quarter. I don't know the address. It's in the phone book."

"Thank you, Mr. Krantz," Carella said. "Thank you very much."

On the way back to the city Meyer was peculiarly silent.

Carella, who had spelled him at the wheel, glanced at him and said, "Do you want to hit Cooper now or after lunch?"

"Might as well do it now," Meyer said somewhat dolefully.

"You seem tired. What's the matter?"

"I think I'm coming down with something. My head feels stuffy."

"All that clean, fresh suburban air."

"No, I must be getting a cold."

"I can go alone," Carella said. "Why don't you go on to lunch?"

"No, it's nothing serious."

"I mean it. I can handle—"

"Stop it already," Meyer said. "You'll make me *meshugah*. You sound just like my mother used to. You'll be asking me if I got a clean handkerchief or something next."

"You got a clean handkerchief?" Carella asked, and Meyer burst out laughing. In the middle of the laugh he suddenly sneezed. He reached into his back pocket, hesitated, then turned to Carella.

"You see that?" he said. "I *haven't* got a clean handkerchief."

"My mother taught me to use my sleeve," Carella said.

"Is there any Kleenex in this car?"

"Try the glove compartment. What'd you think of our esteemed medical man, Dr. Nelson?"

Meyer reached into the glove compartment, found a box of tissues, and blew his nose resoundingly. He sniffed again, said, "Ahhh," and then immediately said, "I don't like doctors, anyway, but this one I particularly dislike."

"How come?"

"He looks like a smart movie villain," Meyer said.

"Which means we can safely eliminate him as a suspect, right?"

"There's a better reason than that for eliminating him. He was home during the show last night. On the other hand, he's a doctor, and would have access to a rare drug like strophantin."

"But he was the one who suggested an autopsy—right?"

"Right. Another good reason to forget all about him. If you just poisoned somebody, you're not going to tell the cops to look for poison, are you?"

"A smart movie villain might."

"Sure, but then a smart movie cop would instantly know the smart movie villain was trying to pull a swiftie."

"Lydia Wistful seems to think he did it," Carella said.

"Lydia Mournful, you mean. Yeah. I wonder why?"

"We'll have to ask her."

"I wanted to, but Karl Villain wouldn't quit the scene."

"We'll call her later. Make a note."

"Yes, sir," Meyer said. He was silent for a moment, and then he added, "This case stinks."

"Give me a good old-fashioned hatchet murder any day."

"Poison is a woman's weapon, as a rule, isn't it?" Meyer asked.

"I don't know. Are there separate rules for men and women?"

"The thing I don't like about you," Meyer said, "is that you're a very argumentative guy."

"Steve Argumentative."

"Steve Loathsome," Meyer corrected.

The Quarter was all the way downtown, jammed into a minuscule portion of the city, its streets as crowded as a bazaar. Jewelry shops, galleries, book stores, sidewalk cafés, espresso joints, pizzerias, paintings on the curb, bars, basement theaters, art movie houses, all combined to give the Quarter the flavor, if not the productivity, of a real avant-garde community.

George Cooper lived on the second floor of a small apartment building on a tiny, twisting street. The fire escapes were hung with flower pots and bright-colored serapes, the doorways were painted pastel oranges and greens, the brass was polished—the whole street had been conceived and executed by the people who dwelt upon it, as quaintly phony as a blind con man.

They knocked on Cooper's door and waited. He answered it with the same scowling expression Meyer had come to love the night before.

"Mr. Cooper?" Meyer said. "You remember me, don't you?"

"Yes, come in," Cooper said. He scowled at Meyer, whom he knew, and then impartially scowled at Carella.

"This is Detective Carella."

Cooper nodded and led them into the apartment. The living

room was sparsely furnished—a narrow black couch against one wall, two black Bertoia chairs against another; the decorating scheme was obviously planned to minimize the furnishings and emphasize the modern paintings that hung facing each other on the other two walls.

The detectives sat on the couch. Cooper sat in one of the chairs opposite them.

"What we'd like to know, Mr. Cooper, is where Stan Gifford went last night while those folk singers were on," Carella explained.

"He went to his dressing room."

"How do you know that?"

"Because that's where I went to cue him later on."

"I see. Was he alone in the dressing room when you got there?"

"No," Cooper said.

"Who was with him?"

"Art Wetherley. And Maria Vallejo."

"Wetherley's a writer," Meyer explained to Carella. "Who's Maria—what's her name?"

"Vallejo. Wardrobe mistress."

"And they were both with Mr. Gifford when you went to call him?"

"Yes."

"Would you know how long they were with him?"

"No."

"How long did *you* stay in the dressing room, Mr. Cooper?"

"I knocked on the door and Stan said, 'Come in,' and I opened the door, poked my head inside and said, 'Two minutes, Stan,' and he said, 'Okay,' and I waited until he came out."

"Did he come out immediately?"

"Well, almost immediately. A few seconds. You can't kid around on television. Everything's timed to the second, you know. Stan knew that. Whenever he was cued, he came."

"Then you really didn't spend any time at all in the dressing room, did you, Mr. Cooper?"

"No. I didn't even go inside. As I told you, I just poked my head in."

"Were they talking when you looked in?" Carella asked.

"I think so, yes."

"They weren't arguing or anything, were they?"

"No, but—" Cooper shook his head.

"What is it, Mr. Cooper?"

"Nothing. Would you fellows like a drink or something?"

"Thanks, nothing for us," Meyer said. "You're sure you didn't hear anyone arguing?"

"No."

"Raised voices?"

"No." Cooper rose. "If you don't mind I'll have one."

Cooper walked into the other room. They heard him pouring his drink, and then he walked into the living room again with a short glass containing ice cubes and a healthy triple shot of whiskey.

"I hate to drink so damn early," he said. "I was on the wagon for a year, you know. How old do you think I am?"

"I don't know," Carella said.

"Twenty-eight. I look older than that, don't I?"

"No, I wouldn't say so," Carella said.

"I used to drink a lot," Cooper explained. The scowl seemed to vanish from his face. "I've cut down."

"When Mr. Gifford left the dressing room," Meyer said, "you were with him—right?"

"Yes."

"Did you meet anyone between the dressing room and the stage?"

"Not that I remember. Why?"

"Would you remember if you'd met anyone?"

"I think so, yes."

"Then the last people who were with Gifford were Art Wetherley, Maria Vallejo, and you. In fact, Mr. Cooper, if we want to be absolutely accurate, the very last person was you."

"I suppose so. No, wait a minute. I think he said a word to one of the cameramen, just before he went on. Something about coming in for the close shot. Yes, I'm sure he did."

"Did Mr. Gifford eat anything in your presence?"

"No."

"Drink anything?"

"No."

"Put anything into his mouth at all?"

"No."

"Was he eating or drinking anything when you went into the dressing room?"

"I didn't go in, I only *looked* in. I think maybe there were some coffee containers around. I'm not sure."

"They were drinking coffee?"

"I told you, I'm not sure."

Carella nodded, then very slowly and calmly said, "What is it you want to tell us, Mr. Cooper?"

Cooper shrugged. "Anything you want to know."

"Yes, but specifically."

"Look, I don't want to get anybody in trouble."

"What is it, Mr. Cooper?"

"Well . . . well, Stan had a fight with Art Wetherley yesterday. Just before the show. Not a fight, an argument. Words. And . . . I said something about I wished Stan would calm down before we went on the air, and Art . . . Look, I don't want to get him in trouble. He's a nice guy, and I wouldn't even mention this, but the papers said Stan was poisoned and . . . well, I don't know."

"What did he say, Mr. Cooper?"

"He said that he wished Stan would drop dead."

Carella was silent for a moment. He rose then and said, "Can you tell us where Mr. Wetherley lives?"

Cooper told them, but it didn't matter very much because Wetherley was out when they got there. They checked downstairs with his landlady, who said she had seen him leaving the building early that morning. No, he didn't have any luggage with him. Why in the world would he be carrying luggage at ten o'clock in the morning?

Carella and Meyer told the landlady that perhaps he would be carrying luggage if he planned to leave the city, and the landlady told them he never left the city on a Thursday because that was when they ran the tape of the show from the night before so the writers could see which jokes had got the laughs and which hadn't, and that was very important to Mr. Wetherley's line of work.

Carella and Meyer explained that perhaps, after what had happened last night, the tape might not be run today. But the landlady said it didn't matter what had happened last night, they'd probably get a replacement for the show, and then Mr. Wetherley would have to write for it anyway, so it was very important that he see the tape.

They thanked her, then called the network, who told them the tape was not being shown today and, no, Wetherley was not there.

They had lunch in a diner near Wetherley's apartment, debated

putting out a pick-up-and-hold on him, and decided this would be a little drastic on the basis of hearsay, assuming Cooper was telling the truth to begin with—which he might not have been. They were knowledgeable and hip cops and they knew all about that television rat-race where people slit each others' throats and stabbed each other in the back. It was, after all, quite possible that Cooper was lying. It was, in fact, quite possible that *everybody* was lying.

So they called the Squad Room and asked Bert Kling to put what amounted to a telephone surveillance on Wetherley's apartment, calling him every half hour, and warning him to stay right in that apartment where he was, in case he happened to answer the phone. Bert Kling had nothing else to do but call Wetherley's apartment every half hour, being involved in trying to solve four burglaries and three Grover Park muggings, so he was naturally very happy to comply with Carella's wishes.

The two detectives discussed how large a tip they should leave the waitress, settled on a trifle more than fifteen per cent, then went out into the street again. They got into Carella's car and drove uptown, hoping Maria Vallejo would be home and willing to talk to them...

The street on which Maria Vallejo lived was in one of the city's better neighborhoods, a block of old brownstones with clean-swept stoops and curtained front doors. They entered the tiny lobby with its polished brass mailboxes and bell buttons, found a listing for Maria in Apartment Twenty-two, and rang the bell.

The answering buzz was long and insistent; it continued noisily behind them as they climbed the carpeted steps to the second floor. They rang the bell outside the apartment door. It opened almost immediately.

Maria was small and dark and bursting with energy. She was perhaps thirty-two, with thick black hair pulled tightly to the back of her head, flashing brown eyes, a generous mouth, and a nose that had been turned up by a plastic surgeon. She wore a white blouse and black tapered slacks. A pair of large, gold hoop earrings decorated her ears, but she wore no other jewelry.

She opened the door and then looked out at the detectives in puzzlement.

"Yes?" she said. "What is it?" She spoke without a trace of accent. If Carella had been forced to make a regional guess based on her speech, he'd have chosen Boston.

"We're from the police," he said, flashing his buzzer. "We're investigating the death of Stan Gifford."

"Oh, sure," she said. "Come on in."

They followed her into the apartment. The room was furnished in brimming good taste, cluttered with objects picked up in the city's antique and junk shops. The shelves and walls were covered with ancient nutcrackers and old theater posters and a French puppet, and watercolor sketches for costumes and stage sets, and several enameled army medals, and a black silk fan, and pieces of driftwood.

The living room was small, with wide curtained windows overlooking the street, luminous with the glow of the afternoon sun. It was furnished with a sofa and chair covered in deep green velvet, a bentwood rocker, a low needlepoint footstool, a marble-topped table on which lay several copies of *Paris Match*.

"Do sit down," Maria said. "Can I get you a drink? Oh, you're not allowed, are you? Some coffee?"

"I can use a cup," Carella said.

"It's on the stove. I'll just pour it. I always keep a pot on the stove. I guess I drink a million cups of coffee a day."

She went into the small kitchen and came back with cups, spoons, sugar, and cream on a small teakwood tray. She shoved aside the copies of the French magazine and served the detectives. Then she sat in the bentwood rocker and sipped her coffee.

"What did you want to know about Stan?" she asked.

"We understand you were in his dressing room with him just before he went on last night, Miss Vallejo. Is that right?"

"That's right," she said.

"Were you alone with him?"

"No, there were several people in the room."

"Who?"

"Gee, I don't remember offhand. I think Art was there, yes . . . and maybe one other person."

"George Cooper?" Carella suggested.

"Yes, that's right. Say, how did *you* know that?"

Carella smiled. "But Mr. Cooper didn't come into the room, did he? He simply knocked on the door and called Mr. Gifford. Isn't that right?"

"No, he came in," Maria said. "He was there quite a while."

"How much time would you say he spent in the dressing room?" Carella asked.

"Oh, maybe five minutes."

"You remember that clearly?"

"Oh, yes. He was there, all right."

"What else do you remember, Miss Vallejo?"

"Oh, nothing. We were just talking. Stan was relaxing while those singers were on and I just sort of drifted in to have a smoke and chat, that's all."

"What did you chat about?"

"I don't remember." She shrugged. "It was just small talk. The monitor was going and those nuts were singing in the background, so we were just making small talk."

"Did Mr. Gifford eat anything? Or drink anything?"

"Gee, no. No, he didn't. We were just talking."

"No coffee? Nothing like that?"

"No. No, I'm sorry."

"Did he take a vitamin pill?"

"Gee, I didn't notice."

"Or any kind of a pill?"

"No, we were just talking, that's all."

"Did you like Mr. Gifford?"

"Well . . ."

"Did you like him, Miss Vallejo?"

"I don't like to talk about the dead."

"We were talking about him just fine until a minute ago."

"I don't like to speak *ill* of the dead," she corrected.

"Then you didn't like him?"

"Well, he was a little demanding."

"Demanding how?"

"I'm the show's wardrobe mistress, you know."

"Yes, we know."

"I've got eight people working under me—that's a big staff. I'm responsible for all of them, and it's not easy to costume that show each week, believe me. Well, I . . . I don't think Stan made the job any easier, that's all. He—well—well, really, he didn't know very much about costumes and he pretended he did and—well, he got on my nerves sometimes, that's all."

"I see," Carella said.

"But you went into his dressing room to chat, anyway," Meyer said.

"Well, there wasn't a feud between us or anything like that. It's just that every once in a while we yelled at each other a little,

that's all. Because he didn't know a damn thing about costumes and I happen to know a great deal about costumes, that's all. But that didn't stop me from going into his dressing room to chat a little. I don't see anything so terribly wrong about that."

"No one said anything was wrong, Miss Vallejo."

"I mean, I know a man's been murdered and all, but that's no reason to start examining every tiny little word that was said or every little thing that was done. People *do* argue, you know."

"Yes, we know."

Maria stopped rocking, turned her head toward the curtained windows streaming sunlight, and very softly said, "Oh, what's the use? I guess they've already told you Stan and I hated each other's guts." She shrugged hopelessly. "I think he was going to fire me. I heard he wouldn't put up with me any longer."

"Who told you that?"

"David. David Krantz, our producer. He told me Stan was about to give me the ax. *That's* why I went to his dressing room last night. To ask him about it, to try to . . . well, the job pays well. I didn't want to lose the job."

"Did you discuss the job with him?"

"I started to, but then Art came in, and right after that George, so I didn't get a chance." She paused again. "I guess it's academic now, isn't it?"

"I guess so."

Meyer blew his nose noisily, put his tissue away, and then casually said, "Are you very well known in the field, Miss Vallejo?"

"Oh, yes, sure."

"So even if Mr. Gifford *had* fired you, you could always get another job. Isn't that so?"

"Well, word gets around pretty fast in this business. It's not good to get fired from *any* job. I'm sure you know that. And in television . . . I would have preferred to resign, that's all. So I wanted to clear it up, you see, which is why I went to his dressing room. To clear it up. If it was true he was going to let me go, I wanted the opportunity of leaving the job of my own volition."

"But you never got a chance to discuss it with him."

"No. I told you. Art walked in."

"Well, thank you, Miss Vallejo," Carella said, rising. "That was very good coffee."

"Listen—"

She had come out of the bentwood rocker now, the rocker still moving back and forth, and she stood in the center of the room with the sun blazing on the curtains behind her. She worried her lip for a moment, and then said, "Listen, I didn't have anything to do with this."

Meyer and Carella said nothing.

"I didn't like Stan and maybe he *was* going to fire me, but I'm not nuts, you know. I'm a little temperamental maybe, but I'm not nuts. We didn't get along, that's all. That's no reason to kill a man. I mean, a lot of people on the show didn't get along with Stan. He was a difficult man, you know, and the star. We blew our stacks every now and then, that's all. But I didn't kill him. I—I wouldn't know how to begin hurting someone."

The detectives kept staring at her. Maria gave a small shrug.

"That's all," she said.

The afternoon was dying by the time they reached the street again. Carella glanced at his watch and said, "Let's call Bert. See if he had any luck with our friend Wetherley."

"You call," Meyer said. "I feel miserable." He sniffed emphatically.

"You'd better get to bed," Carella said. "Take some aspirin, too."

They went into the nearest drugstore, and Carella called the Squad Room. Kling told him he had tried Wetherley's number three times so far, but no one had answered the phone. Carella thanked him, hung up, and went out to the car where Meyer was blowing his nose and looking very sick indeed. By the time they got back to the Squad Room, Kling had called the number a fourth time; again without luck.

Carella told Meyer to get the hell home, but Meyer insisted on typing up at least one of the reports on the people they'd talked to that day. He left the Squad Room some twenty minutes before Carella did.

Carella finished the reports in time to greet his relief, Andy Parker, who was a half hour late, as usual. He tried Wetherley's number once more, and then told Parker to keep trying it all night long, and to call him at home if he reached Wetherley. Parker assured him that he would, but Carella wasn't at all sure he'd keep the promise.

He got to his house in Riverhead at seven fifteen. The twins met him at the door, almost knocking him over in their headlong rush to greet him. He picked up one under each arm and was swinging them toward the kitchen when the telephone rang.

He went to the phone.

"Hello?" he said.

"Bet you thought I wouldn't, huh?" the voice said.

"Who's this?"

"Andy Parker. I just called Wetherley. He told me he got home about ten minutes ago. I advised him to stick around until you got there."

"Oh," Carella said. "Thanks."

He hung up and turned toward the kitchen where Teddy was standing in the doorway. He looked at her silently for several moments, and she stared back at him. Then he shrugged. "I guess I can eat before I leave."

Teddy sighed almost imperceptibly, but Mark, the older of the twins by five minutes, was watching the byplay with curious intensity. He made a vaguely resigned gesture with one hand and said, "There he goes." And April, thinking it was a game, threw herself into Carella's arms, squeezed the breath out of him, and squealed, "There he goes, there he goes, there he goes!"

Art Wetherley was waiting for him when he got there. He led Carella through the apartment and into a studio overlooking the park. The studio contained a desk on which sat a typewriter, an ashtray, a ream of blank paper, and what looked like another ream of typewritten sheets covered with penciled hen-scratches. There were several industry-award plaques on the wall and a low bookcase beneath them.

Wetherley gestured to one of the two chairs in the room, and Carella sat in it. Wetherley seemed extremely calm, eminently at ease, but the ashtray on his desk was full of cigarettes.

"I'm not used to getting phone calls from the police," he said immediately.

"Well, we were here—"

"Especially when they tell me to stay where I am, not to leave."

"Andy Parker isn't the most tactful—"

"I mean, I didn't know this was a dictatorship," Wetherley said.

"It isn't, Mr. Wetherley," Carella said gently. "We're investigating a murder, however, and we were here earlier today, but—"

"I was out all day. There's no law against that."

"Certainly not." Carella smiled. "I'm sorry if we inconvenienced you, but we did want to ask you some questions."

Wetherley seemed slightly mollified. "Well, all right," he said. "But there was no need, really, to warn me not to leave the apartment."

"I apologize for that, Mr. Wetherley."

"Well, all right," Wetherley said.

"I wonder if you could tell me what happened in Stan Gifford's dressing room last night. Just before he left it."

"I don't remember in detail."

"Well, suppose you just tell me what you *do* remember."

Wetherley thought for a moment, crushed out his cigarette, lighted a new one, then said, "Maria was there when I came in. She was arguing with Stan about something. At least—"

"Arguing?"

"Yes. I could hear them shouting before I knocked on the door."

"Go ahead."

"The atmosphere was a little strained after I went in, and Maria didn't say very much all the while I was there. But Stan and I were joking, mostly about the folk singers. He hated folk singers, but this particular group is hot right now and he was talked into hiring them for the show."

"So the two of you were making jokes about them?"

"Yes. While we watched the act on the monitor."

"I see. In a friendly manner, would you say?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then what happened?"

"Well, then George came in—George Cooper, the show's A.D."

"He came into the room?"

"Yes."

"How long did he stay?"

"Oh, three or four minutes, I guess."

"I see. But *he* didn't argue with Gifford, did he?"

"No."

"Just Maria?"

"Yes. Before I got there."

"I understand. And what about you?" Carella asked.

"Me?"

"Yes. What about your argument with Gifford before the show went on the air?"

"Argument? Who said there was an argument?"

"Wasn't there one?"

"Certainly not."

Carella took a deep breath. "Mr. Wetherley, didn't you say you wished Stan Gifford would drop dead?"

"No, sir," Wetherley said emphatically.

"You did *not* say that?" Steve said.

"No, sir, I did not. Stan and I got along very well." Wetherley paused. "A lot of people on the show *didn't* get along with him, but I never had any trouble."

"Who didn't get along with him?"

"Well, Maria, for one. I just told you that. And David Krantz didn't particularly like him. He was always saying, within earshot of Stan, that all actors are cattle, and that comedians are only funny actors. And George Cooper didn't exactly enjoy his role of—well, handyman, almost. Keeping everyone quiet on the set and running for coffee, and bringing Stan his pills and making sure everybody—"

"Bringing Stan his *what*?"

"His pills," Wetherley said. "Stan was a nervous guy, you know. I guess he was on tranquilizers. Anyway, George was the chief errand boy and bottle washer, hopping whenever Stan snapped his fingers."

"Did George bring him a pill last night?" Carella wanted to know.

"When?" Wetherley asked.

"Last night. When he came to the dressing room."

Wetherley concentrated for a moment, then said, "Now that you mention it, I think he did."

"You're sure about that?"

"Yes, sir. I'm positive."

"And did Stan *take* the pill?"

"Yes, sir."

"And did he swallow it?"

"Yes, sir."

Carella rose suddenly. "Would you mind coming along with me?"

"Come along? Where?"

"Uptown. There are a few things we'd like to get straight."

The few things Carella wanted to get straight were the conflict-

ing stories of the last three people who were with Gifford before he went on camera. He figured that the best way to do this was in the 'Squad Room, where the police would have the psychological advantage in the question-and-answer game.

There was nothing terribly sinister about the green globes hanging outside the station house, or about the high desk in the muster room, or the sign advising all visitors to stop at the desk, or even the white sign announcing DETECTIVE DIVISION in bold black letters, and pointing toward the iron-runged steps leading upstairs.

There was certainly nothing menacing about the steps themselves or the narrow corridor they opened onto, or the various rooms in the corridor with their neatly lettered signs, INTERROGATION, LAVATORY, CLERICAL. The slatted-wood railing that divided the corridor from the Squad Room was innocuous-looking, and the Squad Room itself—in spite of the meshed-wire grids over the windows—looked like any business office in the city, with desks, filing cabinets, ringing telephones, a water cooler, bulletin boards, and men working in shirt sleeves.

But Art Wetherley, Maria Vallejo, and George Cooper were visibly rattled by their surroundings, and they became more rattled when they were taken into separate rooms for their interrogation. Cotton Hawes, a big cop with a white streak in his otherwise red hair, questioned Cooper in the Lieutenant's office. Steve Carella questioned Maria in the Clerical office. Meyer Meyer, suffering from a cold and not about to take any nonsense, questioned Art Wetherley at the table in the barely furnished Interrogation Room.

The three detectives had decided beforehand what questions they would ask and what their approach would be. In separate rooms they went through a familiar routine.

"You said you weren't drinking coffee, Miss Vallejo," Carella said. "Mr. Cooper tells us there *were* coffee containers in that room. Were there or weren't there?"

"No. I don't remember. I know I didn't have any coffee."

"Did Art Wetherley?"

"No. I didn't see him drink anything, either."

"Did Cooper hand Gifford a pill?"

"No."

"Were you arguing with Gifford before Art Wetherley came in?"

"No."

"Let's go over this one more time, Mr. Cooper," Hawes said. "You say you only knocked on the door and poked your head into the room."

"That's right."

"You were there only a few seconds."

"Yes. Look, I—"

"Did you give Stan Gifford a pill?"

"A pill? No! No, I didn't!"

"But there were coffee containers in the room, huh?"

"Yes. Look, I didn't give him anything! What are you trying—"

"Did you hear Art Wetherley say he wished Gifford would drop dead?"

"Yes!"

"All right, Wetherley," Meyer said, "when did George Cooper give Gifford that pill?"

"As soon as he came in the room."

"And Stan Gifford washed it down with what?"

"With the coffee we were drinking."

"You were all drinking coffee, huh?"

"Yes."

"Who was?"

"Maria and Stan, and I was, too."

"Then why'd you go to that room, Maria, if not to argue?"

"I went to—to talk to him. I thought we could—"

"But you *were* arguing, weren't you?"

"No. I swear to God, I wasn't!"

"Then why are you lying about the coffee? Were you drinking coffee or weren't you?"

"No. No coffee. Please, I—"

"Now hold it, Mr. Cooper. You were either in that room or not in it. You either gave him a pill or you—"

"I didn't, I'm telling you!"

"Did you *ever* give him pills at all?"

"No."

"But Gifford was taking tranquilizers, wasn't he?"

"I don't know. I never brought him anything."

"Never?"

"Once maybe or twice. An aspirin. If he had a headache."

"But never a tranquilizer?"

"No."

"How about a vitamin capsule?"

"He handed him the pill," Wetherley said.

"What kind of a pill?"

"I don't know. A small pill."

"What color?"

"White."

"A tablet, you mean? Like an aspirin? Like that?"

"Yes. Yes, I think so. I don't really remember."

"Well, you saw it, didn't you?"

"Yes, but . . ."

They put it all together afterward in the Squad Room. They left the three suspects in the Lieutenant's office with a patrolman watching over them and they sat around Carella's desk and compared their answers. They were not particularly pleased with the results, but neither were they surprised by them.

They had all been cops for a good many years, and nothing human beings perpetrated against each other ever surprised them. They were perhaps a little saddened by what they discovered each and every time, but never surprised. The facts were simple and disappointing. They decided, after comparing results, that all three of their suspects were lying.

Maria Vallejo *had* been arguing with Gifford, and she *had* been drinking coffee, but she denied both allegations because she realized how incriminating these seemingly isolated circumstances might seem. She recognized quite correctly that someone could have poisoned Gifford by dropping something into his coffee. If she admitted there had been coffee in the dressing room, that indeed she and Gifford had been drinking coffee together, and if she then further admitted they'd been arguing, could she not have been the one who slipped the lethal dose into the brew?

So Maria had lied in her teeth, but had graciously refused to incriminate anyone else while she was lying. It was enough for her to fabricate her own way out of what seemed like a horrible trap.

Art Wetherley had indeed wished his employer would drop

dead, and he had wished it out loud, and he had wished it in the presence of someone else. And that night—lo and behold!—Stan Gifford *did* drop dead, on camera, for millions to see. Art Wetherley, like a child who'd made a fervent wish, was startled to realize it had come true. Not only was he startled, he was frightened. He immediately remembered what he'd said to George Cooper before the show; and he was certain Cooper would remember it, too. His fear reached new dimensions when he recalled that he had been one of the last few people to spend time with Gifford while he was alive, and that his proximity to Gifford in an obvious poisoning case, coupled with his chance remark during rehearsal, could easily serve to pin a murder rap on him.

When a detective called and warned him not to leave the apartment, Wetherley was certain he'd been picked as the patsy of the year, an award that did not come goldplated like an Emmy. In desperation he had tried to discredit Cooper's statement by turning the tables and presenting Cooper as a suspect himself. He had seen Cooper bringing aspirins to Gifford at least a few times in the past three years. He decided to elaborate on what he'd seen, thus incriminating Cooper. But a frightened man doesn't care who takes the blame, so long as it's not himself.

In much the same way Cooper came to the sudden realization that not only was he one of the last people to be with Gifford, he was *the* last person. Even though he had spent several minutes with Gifford in the dressing room, he thought it was safer to say he had only poked his head into it. And whereas Gifford hadn't stopped to talk to a soul before he went on camera, Cooper thought it was wiser to add a mystery cameraman. Then, to clinch his own escape from what seemed like a definitely compromising position, he remembered Wetherley's earlier outburst and promptly paraded it before the investigating cops, even though he knew the expression was one that was uttered a hundred times a day.

Liars all.

But murderers none.

The detectives were convinced, after a grueling three-hour session, that these assorted liars were now babbling all in the cleansing catharsis of truth. Yes, we lied, they all separately admitted, but now we speak the truth, the shining truth. We did not kill Stan Gifford. We wouldn't know strohoosis from a hole in the wall. Look at us. Liars, yes, but murderers, no. *We did not kill.*

The detectives believed them.

They had heard enough lies in their professional lives to know that truth has a shattering ring which can topple skyscrapers. They sent the three home without apologizing for any inconvenience.

Cotton Hawes yawned, stretched, asked Carella if he needed him any more, put on his hat, and went home, too. Meyer and Carella sat in that lonely Squad Room and faced each other across the desk. They faced the facts.

They were beginning to believe that Gifford had taken his own life.

On Monday morning they drove out to Larksview again.

They had spent all day Friday and part of Saturday questioning a goodly percentage of the two hundred and six people who were present in the studio loft that night. They did not consider any of them possible suspects in a murder case. As a matter of fact, they were trying hard to find something substantial on which to hang a verdict of suicide. Their line of questioning followed a single simple direction: they wanted to know whether anyone connected with the show had, at any time before or during the show, seen Stan Gifford put anything into his mouth.

The answers did nothing to substantiate a theory of suicide. Most of the people connected with the show were too busy to notice who was putting what into his mouth; some of the staff hadn't come across Gifford at all during the day, and those who had spent any time with him had definitely not seen anything go into his mouth.

A chat with David Krantz revealed that Gifford was in the habit of delaying dinner until after the show each Wednesday, eating a heavy lunch to carry him through the day. This completely destroyed the theory that perhaps Gifford had eaten again after meeting his wife. But it provided a new possibility for speculation, and it was this possibility that took Meyer and Carella to Larksview once more.

Happily, the reporters and photographers had forsaken the Gifford house now that the story had been pushed off the front page and onto the pages reserved for armchair detection. Meyer and Carella drove to the small parking area, walked to the front door, and once again pulled the brass knob set into the jamb.

The housekeeper opened the door and said, "Oh, it's you again."

"Is Mrs. Gifford home?" Carella asked.

"I'll see," she said, and closed the door in their faces.

They waited. In a few moments the housekeeper returned.

"Mrs. Gifford is having coffee in the dining room," she said.
"She says you may join her, if you wish."

"Thank you," Carella said, and they followed her inside.

A huge winding staircase started just inside the entrance hall, thickly carpeted, swinging to the upper story. Doors opened onto the living room, beyond which was a small dining room with a bay window overlooking the back yard.

Lydia Gifford sat alone at the table, wearing a quilted robe. Her blonde hair was uncombed and hung loosely about her face. As before, she wore no makeup, but she seemed more rested now, more at ease.

"I was just having breakfast," she said. "I'm afraid I'm a late sleeper. Won't you have something?"

Meyer took the chair opposite her and Carella sat beside her at the table. She poured coffee for both men.

"Mrs. Gifford," Carella said, "when we were here last time you said something about your husband's physician, Karl Nelson."

"Yes," Lydia said. "Sugar?"

"Thank you." Carella spooned a teaspoonful into his coffee, then passed the sugar bowl to Meyer. "You said you thought he'd murdered your husband. Now what made you say that?"

"I believed it," Lydia Gifford stated.

"Do you still believe it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I see now that it would have been impossible. I didn't know the nature of the poison at the time."

"Its speed, you mean?"

"Yes."

"You mean it would have been impossible because Dr. Nelson was not at the studio?"

"Yes."

"But what made you suspect him in the first place?"

"I tried to think of who could have had access to poison and I immediately thought of Karl."

"So did we," Carella said.

"I imagine you would have," Lydia said. "These muffins are very good. Won't you have some?"

"No, thank you. But even if he did have access why would he have wanted to kill your husband?"

"I have no idea."

"Didn't the two men get along?"

"You know doctors," Lydia said. "They all have God complexes." She paused, then added, "In any universe there can only be one God."

"And in Stan Gifford's universe *he* was God."

Lydia sipped at her coffee and said, "If an actor hasn't got his ego, then he hasn't got anything."

"Are you saying the two egos came into conflict occasionally, Mrs. Gifford?"

"Yes."

"But not in any serious way, surely."

"I don't know what men consider serious. I know that Stan and Karl occasionally argued. So when Stan was killed, as I told you, I tried to figure out who could have got his hands on any poison, and I thought of Karl."

"This was before you knew the poison was strophantin."

"Yes. Once I found out what the poison was, and knowing Karl was home that night, I realized—"

"But if you didn't know the poison was strophantin, then it could have been any poison."

"Yes. But—"

"And you also must have known that a great many poisons can be purchased in drug stores, usually in compounds of one sort or another. Like arsenic, cyanide—"

"Yes, I suppose I knew that."

"But you still automatically assumed Dr. Nelson had killed your husband."

"I was in shock at the time. I didn't know what to think."

"I see," Carella said. He picked up his cup and took a long deliberate swallow. "Mrs. Gifford, you said your husband took a vitamin capsule after lunch last Wednesday."

"That's right."

"Did he have that capsule with him or did you bring it to him when you went into the city?"

"He had it with him."

"Was he in the habit of taking vitamin capsules with him?"

"Yes," Lydia said. "He was supposed to take one after every meal. Stan was a very conscientious man. When he knew he was

going into the city he carried the vitamins with him, in a small pillbox."

"Did he take only one capsule to the city last Wednesday? Or two?"

"One," Lydia said.

"How do you know?"

"Because there were two on the breakfast table that morning. He swallowed one with his orange juice and he put the other in the pillbox, then put it in his pocket."

"And you saw him take that second capsule after lunch?"

"Yes."

"And to your knowledge, that was the only capsule he took after leaving this house last Wednesday."

"That's right."

"Who put those capsules on the breakfast table, Mrs. Gifford?"

"My housekeeper." Lydia looked suddenly annoyed. "I'm not sure I understand all this," she said. "If he took the capsule at lunch, I don't see how it could possibly—"

"We're only trying to find out for sure whether or not there was a *third* capsule, Mrs. Gifford."

"I just told you there wasn't."

"We'd like to be sure. We know the capsule he took at lunch couldn't possibly have killed him. But if there was a *third* capsule—"

"There were only two," Lydia said. "He knew he was coming home for dinner after the show, the way he did every Wednesday night. There was no need for him to carry more than—"

"More than the one he took at lunch—right?"

"Yes."

"Which couldn't possibly have killed him—right?"

"Yes," Lydia said.

"Nonetheless, we'd like to talk to your housekeeper," Carella said. "Would you mind calling her?"

Lydia lifted the small bell near her right hand, and gave it a rapid shake. The housekeeper came into the dining room immediately.

"These gentlemen would like to ask you some questions, Maureen," Lydia said. "If you don't mind, gentlemen, I'll leave you alone. I'm late for an appointment now, and I'd like to get dressed."

"Thank you for your time, Mrs. Gifford," Carella said.

"Not at all." Lydia started out of the room, then turned at the

door. "Whoever did it," she said, "catch him."

Maureen stood by the table.

Meyer glanced at Carella, who nodded. Meyer cleared his throat and said, "Maureen, on the day Mr. Gifford died, did you set the breakfast table?"

"For him and for Mrs. Gifford, yes, sir. Who else would set it?"

"Do you always set the table?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you put Mr. Gifford's vitamin capsules on the table that morning?"

"Yes, sir. Right alongside his plate, same as usual."

"How many vitamin capsules?"

"Two," Maureen said with certainty.

"Not three?"

"I said two," Maureen said.

"Was anyone in the room when you put the capsules on the table?"

"No, sir."

"Who came down to breakfast first? Mr. Gifford or Mrs. Gifford?"

"Mrs. Gifford came in just as I was leaving."

"And then Mr. Gifford?"

"Yes. I heard him come down about five minutes later."

"Do these capsules come in a jar?"

"A small bottle, sir."

"Could we see that bottle, please?"

"I keep it in the kitchen." Maureen paused. "You'll have to wait while I get it." She went out of the room.

Carella waited until he could no longer hear her footfalls, then asked, "What are you thinking?"

"I don't know. But if Lydia Gifford was alone in the room with those two capsules, she could have switched one of them."

"The one he was taking to lunch?"

"Yeah."

"Only one thing wrong with that theory," Carella said.

"Yeah, I know. He had lunch seven hours before he collapsed." Meyer sighed and shook his head. "We're stuck with that lousy six minutes. It's driving me nuts."

"Besides, why would Lydia want to do in her own dear Godlike husband?"

"I don't know why," Meyer said. "Who cares why? It's just I get

the feeling she's too cooperative. Her and her doctor buddy. Both so very damn helpful. He right away diagnoses poison and insists we do an autopsy. She immediately points to him as a suspect, then changes her mind. And both conveniently away from the studio on the night Gifford died." Meyer nodded. "Maybe that six minutes is *supposed* to drive us nuts."

"How do you mean?"

"Maybe we were *supposed* to find out which poison killed him. I mean, we'd naturally do an autopsy anyway—right? And we'd find out it was strophantin and we'd also find out how fast strophantin works."

"Yeah, go ahead."

"So we'd automatically rule out anybody who wasn't near Gifford before he died."

"That's a'most the entire city."

"No, you know what I mean. We'd rule out Krantz, who says he was in the control booth, and we'd rule out Lydia, who was here, and Nelson, who was at his own house. Krantz called him there, remember?"

"Yes, I remember. So given a dead end to work with, knowing how much poison he'd swallowed, and knowing how fast it worked, we'd come to the only logical conclusion—suicide. Is that what you mean?"

"Right," Meyer said.

"There's only one trouble with that."

"Yeah, what's that?"

"The facts. It *was* strophantin. It *does* work instantly. You can speculate all you want about Lydia, Nelson, and Krantz, but the facts are the same."

"Suppose she *did* switch that lunch capsule?"

"All right, suppose she did. He'd have dropped dead on his way to the studio."

"Or suppose Krantz got to him *before* he went up to the control booth?"

"Then Gifford would have shown symptoms of poisoning before the show even went on the air."

"Arrrggh, facts," Meyer said, and Maureen came back into the room.

"I asked Mrs. Gifford if it was all right," she said. She handed the bottle of vitamin capsules to Carella. "You can do whatever you like with them."

"We'd like to take them with us, if that's all right. We'll give you a receipt," Meyer said.

He looked at the bottle of vitamins in Carella's hand. The capsules were jammed into the bottle, each one opaque and colored purple and black. Meyer stared at them sourly. "You're looking for a third capsule," he said to Carella. "There're a *hundred* of them in that bottle."

He blew his nose then, and began making out a receipt for the bottle.

There is nothing so discouraging as a case that will not make sense. It provides a gloom that can spread from the Squad Room to the entire precinct. Carella and Meyer were only working cops, not mathematicians. But as working cops, they realized how often basic mathematics entered their professional lives and they were baffled and frustrated now by a case that seemed to defy all the laws of addition and subtraction.

They could have called it suicide and had done with it, but the feel was wrong; the feel told them this was murder. Fact upon fact upon fact should have added up to one solution—suicide—and their intuition told them this was wrong.

They stopped at a drug store on the way back to the Squad Room to pick up some fresh medication for Meyer's cold. At the Squad Room, Carella put in a call to the police lab, telling them he was sending over a bottle of capsules for analysis. It was still only mid-morning. Carella looked at the wall clock and wondered how long it would take for the messenger to get all the way downtown, wondered how long it would take for the lab to analyze those vitamin capsules.

At the water cooler Meyer was filling a paper cup. He came back to his desk and tore open the cellophane wrapping on what appeared to be a cardboard strip of brightly colored capsules.

"What are you taking now?" Carella asked him.

"These are supposed to be good," Meyer said. "Better than that other junk. Anyway, you only have to take them twice a day."

Carella looked at the wall clock again. Only a minute and a half had passed. Meyer put one of the capsules into his mouth and washed it down with some water.

It was not until ten minutes later that Carella said, "How come?"

"How come what?" Meyer asked.

"How come you only have to take them twice a day?"

And five minutes later, Carella was placing another call to Detective-Lieutenant Sam Grossman at the police lab.

Dr. Karl Nelson's office was on Hall Avenue in a white apartment building with a green awning that stretched to the curb. Carella and Meyer got there at one o'clock, took the elevator up to the fifth floor and then announced themselves to a pretty red-headed receptionist who said the doctor had a patient with him at the moment, but she'd tell him they were waiting, and wouldn't they please have a seat?

They had a seat.

In about ten minutes an elderly lady with a bandage over one eye came out of the doctor's private office. Karl Nelson followed her, hand extended.

"How are you?" he said to the detectives. "Any news?"

"Yes, we have a few ideas, Dr. Nelson," Carella said. "We wanted to get your expert opinion."

"Happy to help in any way I can." He turned to his receptionist. "When's my next appointment?"

"Two o'clock, Doctor."

"No calls except emergencies until then, please," Nelson said, and he led the detectives inside. He sat immediately at his desk, offered Carella and Meyer chairs, then folded his hands before him in a patiently expectant way.

"I've got a cold," Meyer said.

Nelson's eyebrows went up.

"I've been trying everything," Meyer continued. "I just started on some new stuff. I hope it works."

Nelson nodded, then smiled in professional sympathy. He glanced from Carella to Meyer, waiting. Carella reached into his jacket pocket and placed a purple and black gelatin capsule on the desk near Nelson's folded hands. He didn't say a word for several seconds. Then he asked, "Know what that is, Dr. Nelson?"

"It looks like a vitamin capsule."

"It is—to be specific, a PlexCin capsule, the combination of Vitamin C and B-complex that Gifford was taking."

"Oh, yes," Nelson said, nodding.

"In fact, to be more specific, it is a capsule taken from the bottle of vitamins Gifford kept in his home."

"Yes?" Nelson said. He seemed extremely puzzled.

"We sent the bottle of capsules to the lab this morning," Carella said. "No poison in any of them. Only vitamins."

"But I've got a cold," Meyer said.

Nelson frowned.

"And Detective Meyer's cold led us to call the lab again, just for the fun of it. We've been down there all morning, Dr. Nelson. Sam Grossman, who's in charge of the lab, had some interesting things to tell us, and we wanted your ideas. We want to be as specific about this as possible, you see, since there are a great many specifics in the Gifford case. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"The specific poison, for example, and the specific dose, and the specific speed of the poison, and the specific dissolving rate of a gelatin capsule. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, that's right," Nelson said.

"You're an attending physician at General Presbyterian, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am."

"We called the A.M.A. after we left the lab. Didn't know you'd been a captain in the Army," Carella said, smiling.

"Oh, yes."

"We also called the hospital, Dr. Nelson. We spoke to the pharmacist there. He tells us they stock strophanthin in its crystalline powder form—oh, maybe three or four grains of it. The rest is in ampules, and even that isn't kept in any great amount."

"That's very interesting."

"Open the capsule, Dr. Nelson."

"What?"

"The vitamin capsule. Open it. It comes apart. Go ahead. The size is a double 0, Dr. Nelson."

"I would assume it was either an 0 or a double 0."

"But let's be specific. This specific capsule that contains the vitamins Gifford habitually took is a double 0."

"All right then, it's a double 0."

"Open it."

Nelson took the capsule in his hands and carefully pulled one part from the other. A sifting of powder spilled out.

"That's the vitamin compound, Dr. Nelson. The same stuff that's in every one of those capsules in Gifford's bottle. Harmless. In fact, beneficial. Isn't that right?"

"That's right."

"Take another look at the capsule." Nelson looked. "No, Dr. Nelson, *inside* the capsule. Do you see anything?"

"Why; there—there appears to be a smaller capsule inside it."

"Why, yes!" Carella said. "Upon my soul, there *does* appear to be another capsule inside it. As a matter of fact, Dr. Nelson, it is a number three gelatin capsule which, as you see, fits very easily into the large double 0 capsule. We made this sample at the lab this morning."

Carella took the larger capsule from Nelson and shook out its vitamin contents together with the smaller capsule. Then, using his forefinger, he separated the smaller capsule from the small pile of vitamins and said, "The third capsule."

"I don't know what you mean."

"We were looking for a third capsule, you see. Since the one Gifford took at lunch couldn't possibly have killed him. Now, Dr. Nelson, if this smaller capsule were loaded with strophanthin and placed inside the larger capsule, *that* could have killed him, don't you think?"

"Certainly, but—"

"Yes, Dr. Nelson?"

"Well, it seems to me that—that the smaller capsule would have dissolved very rapidly, too. I mean—"

"You mean, don't you, Dr. Nelson, that if the outside capsule took six minutes to dissolve, the inside capsule might take, oh, another three minutes to dissolve. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes."

"So that it doesn't really change anything. The poison *still* would have had to be taken just before Gifford went on."

"Yes, I would imagine so."

"But I have a cold," Meyer said.

"Yes, and he's taking some capsules of his own," Carella said, smiling. "Only has to take two a day because the drug is released slowly over a period of twelve hours. They're called time-release capsules, Dr. Nelson. I'm sure you're familiar with them."

Nelson seemed as if he were about to rise, and Carella instantly said, "Stay where you are, Dr. Nelson, we're not finished."

Meyer smiled and said, "Of course, *my* capsules were produced under strict pharmaceutical supervision. I imagine it would be impossible to duplicate a time-release capsule without manufacturing facilities, wouldn't it?"

"I would imagine so," Nelson agreed.

"Well, to be specific," Carella said, "Lieutenant Sam Grossman said it *was* impossible to duplicate such a complicated process. But he remembered experiments from away back in his Army days, Dr. Nelson, when some of the doctors in his outfit were playing around with what is called enteric coating. Did the doctors in your outfit try it, too? Do you know the expression?"

"Of course," Nelson said, and he rose. Carella put his hands on the doctor's shoulders and slammed him down into the chair.

"Enteric coating," Carella said, "as it specifically applies to this small *inside* capsule, Dr. Nelson, means that if the capsule had been immersed for exactly thirty seconds in a one-per-cent solution of formaldehyde, then allowed to dry—"

"What is all this?"

"—then held for two weeks to allow the formaldehyde to act on the gelatin, hardening it, then the—"

"I don't know what you mean!"

"I mean that a capsule treated in just that way would *not* dissolve in normal gastric juices for at least three hours; Dr. Nelson, by which time it would have left the stomach. And after that, it would dissolve in the small intestines within a period of *five* hours. So you see, Dr. Nelson, we're not working with six minutes any more. Only the outside capsule would have dissolved that quickly. We're working with anywhere from three to eight *hours*. We're working with a soft outer shell and an inner nucleus as hard as nails, containing two full grains of poison. To be specific, Dr. Nelson, we are working with the capsule Gifford took *at lunch*, which Mrs. Gifford undoubtedly substituted at the breakfast table, and which was undoubtedly prepared for her by you."

Nelson shook his head. "I had nothing to do with this."

"Ahhh, Dr. Nelson," Carella said. "What did you do? Steal what you needed from the hospital pharmacy?"

Dr. Karl Nelson said not a word.

Carella sighed and took his handcuffs from his belt. "We know *how* you did it, Dr. Nelson. Do you want to tell us *why*?"

They told the police they were lovers, but sitting on straight-backed chairs in the Squad Room, their hands still stained with the ink that had been used to fingerprint them, they seemed like nothing more than murderers.

"We started seeing each other secretly a year ago," Lydia said. Neither of the pair seemed to realize they would be taken from

the precinct by police van in the morning, brought downtown for arraignment, and then held in separate cells, that they would not see each other again until they were brought to trial, and then perhaps never after.

"We asked him for a divorce six months ago," Nelson said. "He refused."

Carella and Meyer listened silently as the tale unfolded. They listened unemotionally, patiently, as Nelson and Lydia told how they had pleaded with Gifford to no avail. The same old story—only the faces were new.

"We loved each other, you see; we *love* each other."

The strophantin had been Nelson's idea. They had not necessarily expected him to die on camera before 80,000,000 eyes; they had only wanted him to die of a huge dose of instant-acting poison while neither of them was close enough to have administered it.

"His dying on camera was pure chance," Nelson said. "We knew it would take between three and eight hours for the inner capsule to dissolve, but we didn't know exactly how long. We'd be nowhere near him, in any case."

And yet they had realized that Nelson, as a physician with access to drugs, would be a prime suspect, and so they had planned for this possibility, too. *He* would be the one who suggested foul play to the police; *he* would be the one who demanded an autopsy. And then Lydia would point an accusing finger at him, a finger that would certainly be turned aside once the police discovered the nature of the poison.

They sat still after they finished talking. The police stenographer showed them transcripts of what they had said, and they signed multiple copies of it, and then Alf Miscolo came out of the Clerical office, handcuffed them, and took them downstairs.

"One for us, one for the Lieutenant, and one for Homicide," Carella told the stenographer.

The stenographer nodded. He, too, had heard it all already. There was nothing you could tell him about love or homicide. He left his copies, put on his hat, and went out.

"I wonder . . ." Carella started, and then shook his head.

"What do you wonder?" Meyer asked.

"Well, I wonder what it's like to be a postman."

"That's funny. They wonder what it's like to be cops."

"I just . . ." Carella shook his head again, then sighed heavily. "Come on," he said, "let's go home."

BONUS NOVELET

John and Ward Hawkins

Shadow of the Noose

Second Lieutenant Peter Cameron had been assigned the duty of defense counsel in behalf of Private Alan Pomeroy who was facing a general court-martial on the charge of first-degree murder. As a lawyer, Pete Cameron was only a beginner, and despite the uniform he wore, he certainly wasn't much of a soldier. He had not yet submitted to Army discipline, had not yet admitted the Army's right to punish. But as a civilian, Pete Cameron possessed courage far above and beyond the call of duty; as a civilian, he could—with full knowledge of what he was doing—put his head in the mouth of an Army cannon...a loaded Army cannon!

This courtroom murder novelet will grip your interest and, before it is finished, bring a lump to your throat. . . .

King City's Hotel Marion offered the only air-conditioned dining room within 30 miles of Camp Clements. All military personnel eating there received exactly the same service. The hotel manager was a man who refused to believe high rank rated special privileges. Possibly because he'd been a buck private in World War II.

In his dining room a second lieutenant could seat himself at a table with a commanding general. He could, that is, if he was so foolhardy or so driven by necessity that he'd risk spending the rest of his Army career counting paper clips in some remote polar region. Commanding generals dislike people who take advantage of them, and the hotel manager's protection could extend only as far as the door.

Knowing all this, 2nd Lt. Pete Cameron entered the dining room. He found Maj. Gen. Daniel B. Sisson, commanding general of Camp Clements, alone at a table, went to that table, saluted, and took the chair opposite. After unfolding his napkin with hands that shook only a little, he met the general's blunt stare. . . .

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Dear Anne: It was like looking down the barrel of a loaded mortar. Sitting there, I was a guy waiting to get my head blown off. Let's face it, your husband's not real bright. Only a complete idiot would indulge in such utter folly. I told myself that, and did it anyway.

"Good evening, sir," Pete said.

The general said nothing. He looked at 2nd Lt. Peter Cameron steadily for perhaps a moment. Then he looked at the dozen empty tables in the room.

"I prefer to eat alone, Lieutenant."

"I know that, sir," Pete said.

Rank was not the only difference between the two men. The general was in his fifties, stocky, thick-shouldered, erect. His face was disciplined, square, and weathered. He had short gray hair and cold gray eyes. His mouth was a flat, inflexible line. He was as military as an M-1 rifle.

Pete Cameron was 26. He had quiet brown eyes, rather long lashes, and hair that was thick, dark, and unruly. His shoulders were slightly rounded and he was a few pounds too heavy for his five feet nine. His was a shape no uniform would ever fit with precision. No amount of training or trying would ever give him the bearing, the quick snap and hard polish of the truly military. He was obviously new to the Army and, to the general's eye, barely a soldier.

"Have you been drinking?" the general asked.

"I've had one drink, sir," Pete said. "Just one."

"Yet you want to eat at my table?"

"Not particularly, sir," Pete said. "To tell the truth, I'm so nervous I doubt if I could swallow."

"Then why are you here?"

"To talk to you, sir." Pete moved silverware, his hands plainly shaking now. "Don't think it's a spur-of-the-moment, sir. I saw you come in ten minutes ago. I've been in the bar arguing with myself ever since." He looked at the general. "It was an argument I lost."

The general continued his cold inspection. He saw a young second lieutenant not yet able to wear a uniform properly. It didn't matter that he was nervous, that a desperate sincerity looked out of his eyes. The general was concerned with a greater issue.

Army methods have been developed by centuries of warfare.

Conformity to them is required. Without conformity there can be no order or discipline. "You're familiar with military channels?" the general said.

"I am, sir."

And he was. You can't see anyone in the Army officially without the permission of the next man up the chain of command. Between a second lieutenant and a commanding general stood a forest of officers who could ask why, who could make you wait, who could say no.

A good thing, channels. Pete didn't doubt it. But sometimes difficult to negotiate. For Pete they had been impossible.

The general said, "You prefer not to use channels?"

"There isn't any time, sir. A man's life is at stake."

"Whose life, Lieutenant?"

"Private Alan Pomeroy's, sir."

"And you are?"

"His defense counsel, sir. Second Lieutenant Peter—"

"—Cameron," the general said.

And, crisply, he highlighted 2nd Lt. Peter Cameron's biography. Date and place of birth. Education. Four years at a state university. Law school. Pete had graduated with honors, passed the state bar, had been admitted to practice in a Federal court. Then active duty. The date of his commission. Training and place of training. Date of his arrival at Camp Clements, a casual officer waiting shipment overseas. Pete must have listened open-mouthed.

"Are you surprised?" the general asked. "This is my command. You're acting as defense counsel for a man facing a general courtmartial, charged with first-degree murder. You have been certified as competent by the Judge Advocate General, but, did you think *I* would not look into your qualifications?"

"It isn't that, sir." Pete said it humbly because he felt humble. "It's the way you had it at your fingertips."

A waitress came with a laden tray. She looked at Pete. He shook his head. While the waitress served the general, Pete had time to wonder again at a system that would appoint a lawyer who'd practiced just five months as defense counsel for a man accused of first-degree murder. Not that he was in any doubt as to how it had happened.

Personnel had gone to the files. The best qualified officers had been assigned the duty. Second Lt. Pete Cameron, defense

counsel, 1st Lt. Hugh Bevins, assistant defense counsel. Hardly a championship team. Pete's experience included little trial work, Bevins had left law school for military service.

Pete's first reaction had been mental mutiny. He had a reverence for "due process of law" that was almost holy. Right of adequate defense, a fair and impartial trial—cornerstones in his book. And what had Pomeroy been given? Cameron and Bevins for the defense—a beginner and something less. Not a trial by jury, a general court-martial. In the Army a man accused of murder stood for judgment before men who'd probably never cracked a lawbook.

"Well, Lieutenant?" the general said.

"I'm sorry, sir. I was—trying to get my facts straight. I stuck my neck out when I sat down here. If I want to get it back with a head on it, I'd better be good. Real good."

"That is correct, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir." Pete wiped sweat from his hands and stepped off the deep end. "As Pomeroy's defense counsel, I was instructed to do what amounted to everything humanly possible to win an acquittal. I took those instructions seriously and literally. Talking to you here is military folly. But it is humanly possible. I had to do it, sir, or fail in my duty."

"Why?"

"You're my last resort, sir. And Pomeroy's. His trial will end tomorrow. I've done all I can to prolong it, hoping the truth would come to light. Colonel McVey is fed up with my stalling. The trial will end, a verdict of guilty will be returned, Pomeroy will be sentenced to hang," Pete wet his lips. "And Pomeroy is an innocent man, sir."

"Can you prove that, Lieutenant?"

"That's what I'm up against." Pete's hands had suddenly become fists. "Can I prove he's innocent? General, the burden of proof to establish the guilt of the accused beyond reasonable doubt is on the Government."

The general's voice was soft. "Lieutenant, your statement contains several grave implications. We'll attend to them in order. First you'll tell me why you believe Pomeroy is innocent." He paused. "Walk carefully, Lieutenant."

Pete Cameron understood the quiet warning, but he could not turn back.

"I've talked to Pomeroy at length," he said. "I know he's

innocent, with my heart and my head, the way I know the sun will come up tomorrow."

"The charges against him were investigated by an officer appointed by me. The staff judge advocate recommended trial by a general court." The general paused, his stare level. "Are you accusing them of poor judgment or of being delinquent in their duty? Watch your answer, Lieutenant."

"The first, sir."

Another moment of staring. "I'll accept that," the general said finally. "We'll go on. The case against Pomeroy is based largely upon the testimony of two men—Sergeant Kennedy and Corporal Wirth, both of the military police, the arresting officers. When you say Pomeroy is innocent you accuse these men. Of what, Lieutenant? Poor judgment or perjury?"

Pete set his jaws. "Perjury, sir."

"On what grounds?"

"They swear they saw Pomeroy and Shirley Dolan together before the murder. Identification positive. They swear they saw them enter the woods in the park together. Identification positive. They swear they saw Pomeroy leave the woods alone a few moments later. Again, identification positive. Since all men in uniform look somewhat alike, this much might be an honest mistake, stubbornly defended. But some of the rest is perjury."

"I'll hear the rest."

"Kennedy and Wirth went into the woods," Pete said. "They found Shirley dead, her neck broken by a hard blow on the jaw, her clothing rumpled. This is true. But when they swear Pomeroy's clothes were torn, his face scratched and his knuckles bruised at the time of the arrest, they're lying, sir. Kennedy and Wirth caught Pomeroy on the walk and beat him up. His scratched face and bruised knuckles came from that, and not from a struggle with the girl."

"What is Pomeroy's story?"

"He admits he knew the girl," Pete said. "Nothing else. She was a civilian clerk-typist in the quartermaster depot. Pomeroy had temporary duty in the depot as a freight handler. He saw her many times, but never dated her. On the night of the murder he was walking in the park alone. Alone, sir. The first he knew of the murder was when Kennedy and Wirth accused him and beat him."

"And you believe Pomeroy?"

"Implicitly, sir."

"The investigating officer and the staff judge advocate found no cause to doubt the testimony of Kennedy with Wirth. Again, indirectly, you accuse them of poor judgment or of being delinquent in their duty. Which is it, Lieutenant?"

"The first, sir."

"A wise choice."

Pete had a brief mental picture of Major Porter, the investigating officer, big-jawed, big-chested, dark-browed; and of the staff judge advocate, Colonel Lewellen, tall, thin-faced, bleak—two very rough men. They weren't going to like any sort of accusation. When word of this got to them, they would take steps.

"Now," the general's voice was still soft. "A moment ago you said, 'Can I prove he's innocent?' From this I assume you feel you're being required to show proof of innocence at the trial, rather than the Government establishing proof of guilt beyond a reasonable doubt."

"That's right, sir."

"Which would constitute an unfair trial," the general said slowly, "and accuse the members of the Court of being delinquent in their duties. Well, Lieutenant?"

Pete opened his sweating hands. He decided he hadn't been in the Army long enough. He wore a uniform, but he hadn't become a soldier. He hadn't submitted to Army discipline, hadn't admitted the Army's right to punish. In spite of the uniform, he'd come to the general's table acting like a civilian, thinking like one. A civilian, he thought, who'd put his head in the mouth of an Army cannon. A loaded cannon.

"I'll go the whole way, sir," he said. "Not that there's much further to go. I guess I've had it. But there is still Pomeroy." He looked fully at the general. "Sir, Pomeroy is not getting a fair and impartial trial."

"You say this out of your wide experience?"

Pete knew he was being given all the rope he could possibly use to hang himself.

"I won't say the members of the Court are delinquent," he said. "I do say they're not qualified sit in judgment of a man on trial for his life. Except for the law officer, they don't know law. They're professional soldiers, not lawyers, not judges. Laymen. They don't know that the first principle of true justice is to judge with a fair and open mind. A mind without prejudicial opinion. They

tried Pomeroy in their minds before the trial. They found him guilty."

"How do you know that, Lieutenant?"

"I can feel it!" Pete said. "I can see it! They heard the prosecution with some interest. With the defense they're bored. It's hot in the court, so they doze. They're impatient that I don't end the trial. The trial is over in their minds, the verdict is guilty. I'm wasting their time. And it's not because they're delinquent. It's because they don't know how to sit in judgment. They haven't been trained for it!"

"I approved the selection of the Court," the general said. "All officers—since the defendant did not request that an enlisted man serve as a member. They are as capable as any who have ever served at a general court-martial, anywhere. A criticism of them is a criticism of all military trials. Will you go *that* far, Lieutenant?"

"You're crowding me, sir."

"A military trial is the final product of military law. If the final product is at fault, so must the system be that produced it. Do you feel that the entire system of military law fails in its purpose?"

"If the case of Pomeroy is a sample, I do."

"His case is typical."

"Then I am forced to conclude there is no possibility of justice under military law, sir. No man accused—guilty or not—can hope for fair treatment or a fair trial."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," the general said. "You may go."

Pete Cameron felt as if the floor had been jerked from under him. He'd been prepared for anything but cold dismissal.

"But, sir!"

"We've gone from Pomeroy to a consideration of the entire system of military law," the general said. "I have your opinions on each point. That should suffice, Lieutenant."

"Sir, what are you going to do?"

The general's quiet voice was edged: "I'm going to dictate a full account of this conversation. A copy will be sent to every man concerned. A copy will also be sent to your commanding officer, with my recommendation that proper disciplinary action be taken against you."

"That doesn't matter, sir." Pete's voice was hoarse. "It's Pomeroy. That man's life is—"

"Attention!"

Pete stiffened in his chair. "Sir, I—"

"I'll have you on your feet at attention!"

Pete came to his feet and came to attention. Rigid and silent, eyes fixed on nothing. It was forever before he heard a curt, "Dismissed!"

There was no argument left in Pete. He executed a staggering right face and stumbled down the corridor to the bar. The bar was crowded with men in uniform. He didn't notice their stares or realize a stool was vacated so he could have a seat at the bar. Presently a tall glass was set before him.

"On me," the bartender said. "The major, here, bets me you fall on your face before old Cut-Throat lets you go."

"Thanks," Pete said. "I can use this."

The talk picked up along the bar. A second lieutenant in a hassle with the commanding general—every soldier in the crowded hotel had stopped to look and listen.

"Hang it on him for courage above and beyond the call of duty. Then shoot him."

"You know what they'll do?" a private said. "They'll give him one of them big deals like you see in the movies. Everybody on the parade ground. Drums rolling. The lieutenant stands at attention. Somebody strips his uniform—bars, buttons, shoulder straps. Then out he goes, all by himself, out the gate, into the sunset." The private had a drink. "Yes, sir. Always wanted to see one of those. Should be real gay."

Pete thought he would go along with the private. The big deal, at least, and a real gay time.

Dear Anne: I'm sorry to report that your soldier went to battle against superior forces. He overextended himself; he was enveloped. Somebody should have told your guy a general doesn't get to be a general because he's got a head full of rocks. This one's got a mind like a bear trap . . .

Like many another married man in the Army, Pete felt himself to be only half of the whole, responsible to the other half for all his actions, owing her a full account of each day's work, good or bad. It had become habit to think of events in letter form, making a mental file until he found time to write. Until now, his letters had been filled with cheer and accomplishment. This one, he thought, would read like doom.

It appears the best I can hope for is a request for my resignation for the good of the service. Conduct unbecoming an officer, insubordination—they've got a dozen to pick from.

Now her face appeared before him. He was glad to see her. A lovely girl, only 21, but a full and understanding woman. Light brown hair, dark brown eyes, a warm mouth. She had a smile for him. She always had a smile for him. Even on the day he'd told her he'd asked for active duty she'd smiled. Never mind that there'd been a shine of tears in her eyes.

"You feel you should," she said. "And I'm not surprised you feel that way. You come from a family with a military tradition."

That tradition. The Cameron blood held a strain of Indian—Sioux Indian, the family said. When he'd told Anne about it, Pete had spoofed her with a tale about a great-uncle of his who'd had his horse shot from under him by General Custer at the battle of Little Big Horn in '76. Fella named something Beaver, he'd said. A junior-type chief in Sitting Bull's army.

The story might have been true—no one could prove it wasn't—but true or not, it'd turned out to be a happy contrivance.

A pair of people losing a year-old home needed a bumper to hold away the hurt. Pete's distant uncle was all Anne's zany imagination needed. Over wine and spaghetti one night, she'd given the uncle a name. Chief Happy Beaver. And a description—a little on the tubby side, sort of shapeless, his eagle feather always askew, his breechclout always slipping.

"Sounds like me," Pete said.

She laughed, "Well, what d'you know?"

They'd really bounced it then. Happy Beaver was no sharp soldier. An earnest, eager sort of guy, always trying, never doing anything quite right. A sad-sack redskin, Uncle Happy Beaver, second-lieutenant type.

"Buy you another?" the bartender said.

"Thanks, no," Pete said. "One's my limit."

The stockade was set in a floodlighted area about a mile from the main gate. Pete Cameron nosed his jeep against a whitewashed rail and cut the switch. He crossed the parking lot to the orderly room. A Pfc sat at a desk inside the door. Sgt. Clifford Kennedy was standing on a chair, adjusting the sweep of an electric fan.

"Lieutenant," he said. "Hot enough for you?"

This one had walked out of a recruiting poster—flat belly, big shoulders, and brown hide. Golden fuzz on the backs of his hands, blue eyes and close-cropped hair. And very GI—glittering shoes, gleaming brass, and a belt trimmed to exactly the proper length. His hardpressed suntans had been tailored to fit only a little more loosely than his skin.

"I guess you want to see your boy," he said.

"Yes," Pete said. "And I'll have a 'sir' from you."

"Yes, sir, Lieutenant!"

There was not quite derision in Kennedy's voice. But neither was there fear or true respect. Kennedy was an old soldier. He knew how far he could go in the baiting of a green officer; he went exactly that far.

And Pete was green. More than that, Pete was trying to prove in court that Kennedy was a liar—knocking himself out, Kennedy's bold eyes said, against a better man.

"Take you in myself," he said. "Sir."

They went past armed guards—maximum security, two keys for every door—and into the stockade proper. Kennedy's voice held a needle.

"Goin' to put me on the stand tomorrow, Lieutenant, sir?" he asked. "Goin' to give me another rough time?" And his tone said that nothing Pete could do would bother him.

"You'll see tomorrow," Pete said.

He set his jaws against anger. He was not going to let Kennedy provoke him. But he wondered what a man like this thought about in the dark hours of the night. He was trying to lie a man to the gallows—did it worry him?

Probably not, Pete decided. Kennedy had the tender conscience of a snake.

They entered a building that stood alone in the center of the stockade, bathed in glaring light. Pvt. Alan Pomeroy's cell was fashioned of heavy steel mesh, a metal box set within a wooden box. The mesh walls made it easy for the guards; they could watch the prisoner without moving from their chairs.

Pomeroy was lying on a rumpled cot, his hands beneath his head. He sat up when he heard the key rattle in the lock.

"Tell the guard when you want out—sir," the sergeant said.

"All right, Sergeant," Pete said.

Pomeroy stared at Pete. "What're you doin' here?"

"I came to talk to you, Alan."

"Ain't that nice?" Pomeroy said. "Grab a chair by the TV set. I'll have the missus bring you a beer."

He was a twenty-year-old, out of the slums of a seaport city. He wore fatigue pants and wooden shower clogs. He had dark hair, a sweat-oiled olive skin, and dark, angry eyes. He'd fought as a welterweight and looked it—tough face, bent nose, scar tissue swelling his brows.

Pete could have wished for a defendant a little less rugged, a little less male. This one looked like a man who could kill a girl as Shirley Dolan had been killed. But appearance does not make a killer.

Pete leaned against the cage wall. "I stuck my chin out today. Yours too. Maybe I did some good, maybe not."

"So what's the scoop?"

Pete told him exactly what had happened at the general's table. When he had finished, Pomeroy's mouth was hard, flat.

"Why the hell'd you do such a thing?"

Pete said, "I hoped it would help."

"I could 'a' told you better." Pomeroy was on his feet, his naked chest close to Pete's shirt. "If you thought a stinkin' second looey could jaw at a two-star general, you're the world's biggest chump. To that guy you're the same kind of dirt I am to you."

"You're wrong, Alan."

"Wrong, am I?" Pomeroy's mouth twisted. "They got me measured for a rope, ain't they? What'd I do? Nothin'. Not a thing. But I'm a lousy buck private, see. I'm dirt. What's a buck private in this man's army? Hell, y'can always draft another one."

Pete said, "Listen to me, Alan."

"When I come into the Army they give me the big pitch," Pomeroy said. "It's goin' to be tough, sure. But one thing I can depend on is Army law—everybody gets a fair shake. What a joke!"

His laugh was ugly. "I'm in the park, waitin' for my missus to get off work. Doin' nothin', hurtin' nobody. Next thing I know, a couple of MP's jump out of the brush and beat the livin' hell out of me. Did I kill anybody?"

"I know you didn't."

"Who else knows? Them fatheaded judges? You're nuts if you think so. The sergeant and the corporal say I killed the babe, an' they got stripes. Army law—bull!"

"The trial isn't over yet, Alan."

"So what're you goin' to do tomorrow?"

Pete rubbed a hand over his tired, sweating face. "I don't know if I'll be there, Alan. I'm not even sure that trial will go on. I hope not. I hope I've set wheels turning that will get you a mistrial. Any kind of a delay will help." He met Pomeroy's eyes. "Whatever happens, I'll do my best."

"Then I'm for the rope!" Pomeroy pivoted away.

Pete stood looking at the oiled, muscled back. He was sick at heart. What could he say? A raw deal was a raw deal.

"Do me a favor," Pomeroy said. "Go into town and see my missus. Get her braced for what they're goin' to hand me tomorrow. Then give her the dope y' gave me—this trial ain't the end of it; it gets reviewed all the way to the President. Lay it on thick. Let her think I'm a sure winner the next round. Will you do that for me?"

"I'll do it."

Pete called the guard. He was outside the cage when Pomeroy came to the wire, hooked his fingers there. Pomeroy had a hard grin for Pete.

"Don't let it get you," he said. "You can't win 'em all."

There was a foul-up at the main gate. Civilian and military vehicles, outbound, were piled up in three long lines. Pete, heading for King City, found himself inching along behind a weapons carrier. He could see flashlights and white helmets up ahead—teams of MP's giving each outbound vehicle a fast and thorough shakedown.

"What's the trouble?" Pete asked.

"More stuff missing from quartermaster depot," an MP told him. "Oil this time. Tires, sugar, butter—all the time something. Beats the hell outa me where it gets to. Ain't comin' through here, I'll tell you that!"

"But they chew you just the same?"

"They do that, sir. They really do."

The Eat-Rite's neon sign went out as Pete reached the door. The proprietor, a fat man in sweat-soaked white, let Pete in and then pulled down the blinds. The place wasn't much—a counter, a dozen tables, a row of booths.

"In the kitchen," the proprietor said.

She was sitting at a bone-white work table, a mug of coffee in her hand. The coffee was cold.

"Hello, Jenny," Pete said.

Jenny Pomeroy was a goodlooking kid, but just a kid. Maybe 18, but not a day older. A tired 18.

"How—how is he?" she asked.

"I don't have to tell you," Pete said. "You know him."

She nodded a weary head. "Yes, I know him. I know how he is out there in jail. He's mean. Dirty mean and swearing. He gets that way when somebody picks on him. And when he's scared. But he's not like that, really. Not inside."

"I know that, Jenny."

"He's a softie, mister." She looked at Pete, her small chin quivering. "He'd give you the shirt off his back."

"Yes, Jenny."

"He made good money, fightin'," she said. "Where is it? Gone; but we didn't spend it. Anybody sick, anybody out of a job—go see Pommie. Anybody that knows him'll tell you. Ask 'em."

"I don't have to."

"How can they say he killed her? Pommie was a fighter, mister. He earned us a living, fighting. He knows what can happen when you hit somebody. Pommie hit a girl? He'd cut his hand off first. Ask anybody."

"He didn't kill her, Jenny."

"Those MP's say he did. They're lyin', mister. That's the last thing a guy like Pommie would do." Her eyes came up. "Why are they lyin', mister?"

"I wish I knew," Pete said.

"Nobody tells a lie for fun," she said. "Even a little lie, a person's got a reason for tellin' it. Sayin' Pommie killed somebody when he didn't, that's a big lie an' needs a big reason. Like what? Pommie never done anything to those guys; he hardly even knew 'em."

She shook her head, her voice fading. "Why would they lie like that about somebody they hardly know?"

"I can't answer that," Pete said. "Jenny, listen to me. A conviction in this trial isn't the end. It will be reviewed. You mustn't give up hope. In the Army a case like his can go clear to the top. To the President. It's every soldier's right. And it doesn't cost him a cent."

"Y'know something, mister?" She was staring at the table. "Pommie was real proud to be a-soldier. Best Army in the world, he said. Sometimes I wondered if he loved the Army more'n he

did me, the way he talked. I'll bet they never get a guy that tries harder. So look what the Army did to him. How about that?"

"Jenny," Pete said, "it isn't finished."

Her head sank to crossed forearms. Her small shoulders sagged, her voice was an empty whisper. "You can give that to the birds, mister."

Dear Anne: Did you ever want to turn in your membership in the human race? Did you ever feel so ashamed you wanted to find a place where no one would know you'd ever been a human being, capable of lies and cruelty and giving pain? I did. I have in my mind a picture of a small girl in an outsized uniform that will live with me forever, forever.

There was a spill of light on the steps of the orderly room of the casual-officers company. First Sgt. Samuel Yarnall sat in that light, face to the cool wind, a cigarette in his hand. He was a tall, lean, redhead man, fifteen years in the service, 32 years old. He had big hands, big feet, big ears. A first sergeant of a company of officers needs special abilities—strength, quiet authority, tact. Yarnall had them all.

He watched Pete Cameron walk out of the night into the company area. His voice was quiet, chiding. "Chin up, Lieutenant. Shoulders back."

"Hello, Sergeant," Pete said. "I'm a lousy soldier."

"From what I hear," Yarnall said, "you been a bad boy."

"Word gets around fast."

"Gets to me, anyway. My big ears, I guess. Ain't much happens on this post I don't hear about." He made room on the steps. "Rest your feet, Lieutenant. Have a smoke."

"Am I in the doghouse?"

"No orders, if that's what you mean."

"What do I do tomorrow?"

"In the Army you follow the last order till you get the next one. Soon as I get the order to put you under barracks arrest, I'll let you know. Meantime, you keep goin' like nothin' happened."

"Arrest," Pete said. "Sounds rough."

They talked about Pete's meeting with the general, the why of it, the result of it. Yarnall made a few pointed remarks about the military future of a man whose head held chowder instead of brains. Grim, he said.

They talked about the trial, the members of the court, Kennedy, Wirth, Pomeroy and Jenny. Yarnall had one firm opinion.

"Colonel McVey's a lot of soldier," he said. "I served under him once. He'll do, Lieutenant."

"Granted he's a good soldier," Pete said. "He's still got no business presiding at a general court-martial. Not trained for it." He snapped his cigarette away. "Kennedy and Wirth are lying. Since I'm the only man who believes that, it's up to me to prove it. And I've got an idea—about as wild as an idea can get. See what you think, Sergeant. If it makes sense, maybe you can give me a hand."

"Shoot, Lieutenant," Yarnall said. And when he'd heard Pete out, he nodded a sober head. "Could be," he said. "There's hardly anything that can't be, in the Army."

"Will you give it a whirl?"

"Why not?" He flipped the gold bar on Pete's shirt collar. "My stripes don't mean a bit more to me than that bar does to you," he said. "I been a buck private three times."

The sun came up the next morning the same as any other day. Pete and 1st Lt. Hugh Bevins, the assistant defense counsel, went to the mess hall. Hugh Bevins was a fairhaired lad, tall, good-looking, easy-going. He was two years older than Pete, an apple polisher by his own cheerful admission. Very little help, but a good guy.

Pete looked in at the orderly room on the way back from mess. Sergeant Yarnall lifted his shoulders—no orders yet.

"Still early," Bevins said. "Got to pick the firing squad. Got to issue rifles and ammunition. Takes time."

They went back to their quarters. Bevins stretched himself comfortably on his bunk. Pete paced and smoked. His eyes kept straying to the P.A. box on the wall. The call would come over that. "Lieutenant Cameron, report to—"

"What you'll hear," Bevins said, "is the tramp of boots. Fall out, Lieutenant! Fall in! Hup, hup, hup...halt! Bandage? Cigarette? I hope you'll face the end with courage, m'boy."

"Keep it up," Pete said, "you'll get a fat lip."

"Would you strike a superior officer?"

"Yeah," Pete said. "If he's a guy I can lick."

A little before nine they did hear the tramp of boots, one pair.

It was the motor-pool corporal, bringing the key to the jeep.

"I get the picture now," Bevins said, "and it's better this way. More dramatic. They're going to shoot you on the courthouse steps."

"Okay," Pete said. "Then I'll know."

But there was no firing squad waiting at the barracks where the general Court was sitting. The trial was going on—prejudiced or not; the general hadn't turned a hand. Pete parked the jeep.

"How about this?" he said.

"Rough." Bevins' voice was sober now. "You got out of line, and for that you should lose your head. But I'd have sworn you'd get the kid a new trial. Even a whisper of prejudice should be enough for that."

"Not in the Army," Pete said.

The courtroom was plain. Scrubbed floors, unfinished walls, bare windows. The bench was at the far end of the room. Desks for the prosecution and defense were near the walls. The Court stenographer and law officer each had a desk and chair.

The witness stand was a plain oak chair. Three rows of benches had been placed well back for spectators.

The trial counsel—the prosecutor—and his assistant were at their table—Capt. Frank Tingley and 1st Lt. Eric Speer, both serious and capable. They nodded at Pete and Bevins. If they'd heard of Pete's talk with the general, they kept it from their faces.

The court reporter, Pfc. Paul Vanderhoof, came over to talk to Pete. Vanderhoof was a twenty-year-old with thick glasses and a shy grin. Another of Personnel's best-availables, his shorthand speed was a bare sixty words a minute. He wanted Pete to check a couple of points in his transcription of yesterday's notes.

"Will you take it slow today, sir?" Vanderhoof asked.

"I'll try," Pete said. "If I get too fast, sound off."

"Thanks, sir. I'm a real snafu, I guess."

"You're doing your best—that's all you can do."

Pomeroy was brought in between two guards. He slid into a chair beside Pete. He was neat in fresh suntans; his hair was wet from combing. Young, but all man, the best material for a soldier—strong and quick, born with a tough courage and a stubborn loyalty. But he was not a good soldier now. His dark face was ugly, his eyes were bitter.

"You look like the guy I had yesterday." His eyes went around

the room. "Looks like the same trial too." His eyes came back to Pete. "How about that, baby? Maybe you was bullin' me about tellin' the general."

"I told you the truth," Pete said. "Nothing came of it."

Pomeroy's laugh was ugly. "You 'n' me, a couple of punks. You don't rate in your league any better'n I do in mine. Who's gonna listen to us? A general? Nuts!"

"The trial's not over, Alan."

"The hell it ain't! It was over the day it started. That's the Army, Jack. So you're innocent and they're gonna hang you—take it up with your chaplain!"

"Easy, Alan," Pete said. "Easy."

"Easy, he says." Pomeroy's voice was thick. "Relax, he says." He put a rough hand on Pete's arm. "I ain't gonna take it layin' down, see? Nobody hangs me without a fight!"

"Ten—hut!"

Pomeroy broke it off as the members of the Court and the law officer took their places at the bench. Lt. Col. Oliver McVey, President of the Court, sat in the center, a white-haired, thin-mouthed man, who wore thick-rimmed glasses. Maj. James Banzer, short, red-faced, and thick-necked, sat at his right. Capt. William Lawson, a mild, soft-voiced shadow, sat at his left. A second captain and three lieutenants filled the rest of the chairs. Seven career soldiers.

Pomeroy had been staring at the Court. Now he looked at Pete. "Do these guys know you blew your top to the general?"

"They should," Pete said.

"Great!" Pomeroy said harshly, "You told the general they're no stinkin' good. That ought to help me a lot, huh?"

Pete shook his head. "You know better, Alan."

"Sure." His hand closed hard on Pete's arm. "An' I know somethin' else. You got guts. Nobody makes you weasel—not me, not anybody. You do what you got to do and take your lumps. I'll go the road with a guy like you, win or lose."

A gavel rapped. "The Court will come to order."

The room became still. Colonel McVey studied the papers before him, then removed his thick-rimmed glasses. He looked at everyone in the room; he looked at Pete last of all. His gaze was level and cold.

Yes, Pete decided, the colonel had heard from the general.

The law officer said, "Proceed with the defense, Lieutenant."

A faint sigh went through the courtroom. They'd all been braced, Bevins more than any. Pete turned to him:

"Any suggestions?"

"Tuck in your tie," Bevins said. "Go with God."

Pete got to his feet. Now he was faced with it—the last battle. He couldn't prolong the trial another day; today he won or lost. And today he was empty-handed. Kennedy and Wirth were lying to win an acquittal. Pete had to break their testimony.

How do you break a lie? How do you drag the truth out of clever men? With what weapons?

Pete wiped sweat from his hands and shook a sudden panic from his mind.

"Corporal Wirth," he said.

Wirth came in quickly, a sight to gladden the heart of any commanding officer. Suntans spotless, brass polished, shoes gleaming. He was lean and hard-bitten.

A trace of a smile pulled at his lips as he sat down. Then his expression changed and he became a man with an earnest desire to help, a soldier doing his duty—and a liar by the shine in his eyes.

"Do you know the penalty for perjury?" Pete asked.

"Dishonorable discharge, sir. Five years' imprisonment."

"Keep that in mind," Pete said.

He shaped his questions carefully, hunting for character flaws, weaknesses—anything at all that might be used to impeach Wirth's testimony. A tedious task, geared to Vanderhoof's painfully slow shorthand, blocked by a dozen sustained objections.

And a total waste. Wirth's answers showed him to be a good, clean, red-blooded American boy.

Pete examined Wirth's relationship to Kennedy. Were they friends? Close friends? No. Corporal and sergeant in the same MP company, that was all. Had Wirth known the deceased, Shirley Dolan, personally? Yes. Date her? No.

"Remember the penalty for perjury, Corporal," Pete said.

Wirth grinned. "Well, I tried to date her, sir. But she always said no. Is that better?"

Laughter in the courtroom. The gavel rapped.

Pete went on to the night of the murder. Wirth's duty, his reason for being with Kennedy, his identification of Pomeroy, before and after the crime, the arrest of Pomeroy, the condition of Pomeroy's face, knuckles and clothes—Pete went into each point

minutely, and gained nothing. This was all old ground; Wirth's answers did not change.

It was hard grueling work for Pete, fun for Wirth. And boring for the members of the Court. A lieutenant sat with his chin on his fist—asleep, Pete was sure. Another stared at the ceiling. The others doodled or scowled at Pete. Colonel McVey alone followed the testimony with an alert eye.

Pete finally dismissed Corporal Wirth. A noon recess was called.

After lunch Pete called Sergeant Kennedy to the stand. He'd called Wirth first, feeling Wirth was the lesser man, the one more likely to break. Kennedy was a bull for strength, confident and clever.

When the course of Pete's questioning became clear—the same course he'd followed with Wirth—there was a rustle of real resentment in the room.

But Pete went stubbornly on. The stifling heat of the room, the impatience of the trial counsel, the incisive voice of the law officer, sustaining against him, warning him, blocking him, added to the anger swelling in his throat—anger born of frustration, of knowing he was losing a fight that should be won.

"Shirley Dolan was your girl, wasn't she?"

"No, sir," Sergeant Kennedy said.

"How often did you date her?"

"I dunno exactly. Maybe a dozen times."

"Were you intimate with her?"

"No, sir. Just friends."

"Repeat that answer, Sergeant. I want no mistake."

"I object!"

The objection was sustained. This was old ground, the law officer said, already thoroughly explored and found barren. There was no reason, at this point, to defame or try to defame the good reputation of the deceased.

Sergeant Kennedy was staring at Pete, derision plain in his eyes. He had just lied again—his eyes admitted it. His eyes were defying Pete to prove the lie.

Pete's mind fogged with red anger. He faced the bench.

"If the Court please," he said hoarsely, "I'm here under orders to do everything humanly possible to free the defendant. An innocent man. I demand the right to follow orders. I demand the right to secure him justice!"

"Is he not getting justice?" the colonel asked.

"There is no justice here!" The words burst from Pete's lips. He could not call them back. "This is not a fair trial; this is a comedy of errors. The defendant was falsely accused. The witnesses against him are guilty of perjury. Corporal Wirth lied. Sergeant Kennedy is lying now!"

Pomeroy was suddenly on his feet, yelling, "Y'damn right he's lying! The dirty, rotten son—"

And the room exploded. Pomeroy's outburst startled the lieutenant whose chin had been propped on his fist, and his chair went over with a crash. The trial counsel was up, loudly protesting; Pomeroy tried to shout him down. The colonel's gavel pounded.

Vanderhoof's thin voice rose in a wailing plea, "Slow down! Slow down! I can't keep up!" And Pete Cameron stood stricken and stunned—he had touched it off.

Pomeroy went suddenly berserk. He leaped the defense table and charged Sergeant Kennedy like a thrown lance. Pete's wild grab missed.

Pomeroy hit Kennedy, shoulder to chest, and took him backward over the witness chair. There was murder in Pomeroy's curses, in his clutching hands. A dozen men leaped to break it up. The MP guards waded in, clubs high.

Pete closed his eyes to the thud of wood on bone and flesh.

Dear Anne: That wasn't an earthquake you heard, that was the end of the world—Happy Beaver's world, at least. Your man committed a lawyer's greatest sin; he lost control of himself. Bevins will tell you he made military history, the most infamous kind. I will tell you he failed in a sacred trust. The defendant did not go free from his trial—he was carried away unconscious.

Pete sat in the jeep, holding his head in his hands. He heard feet on the gravel of the parking area and someone got behind the wheel. It was Bevins, and his voice was tired.

"You're under arrest," he said. "In my custody."

"The trial?"

"Adjourned," Bevins said. "Don't ask me for how long. McVey's too wild-eyed to say. He's burning, Pete."

"Can't blame him. I disgraced the uniform."

"You're no hero, I'll give you that." Bevins got the jeep out of

the parking area and on the road. "I hate to say it, Pete, but I think you're finished."

Pete nodded. "I'll lose my commission—for the good of the service. If the colonel wants to be rough about it, he can hit me with a court-martial."

"Could be," Bevins said.

They approached an intersection. A weapons carrier was parked on the far side of it, and the man at the wheel was Sergeant Yarnall. He waved them down and came over, tall, big-handed, lean. He carelessly tossed them a half salute, shoved his cap far back on red hair, and gave them an easy grin.

"Trial finished?"

"No," Bevins said. "Blown to hell."

He gave Yarnall the story. Yarnall listened, watching Pete's face with a look of wry bafflement.

"Lieutenant, whatever am I going to do with you?"

"We can always feed him to the squirrels," Bevins said.

"Yeah," Yarnall said. "Well, c'mon. I think I've got something that'll do a little good."

"He's under arrest."

"Sure," Yarnall said. "You've got to take him back to the barracks. Anybody say which road you had to take? So it goes through town, where's the beef?"

"That's an evasion," Bevins said. "It could cost me my commission. It would certainly block my promotion. I won't consider it." He looked at Yarnall. "Unless you've got something—say, as hot as a sheriff's pistol?"

"Could get our boy outta the grease."

Pete came erect. "Was I right?"

"Looks like," Yarnall said. "We'll know pretty quick."

Bevins said, "Give me some facts."

Yarnall looked long at Bevins. "It's a deal the lieutenant figured out. That's enough. It ain't good for an officer to know too much. Make's 'em responsible, see? Not knowing, you can always pass the buck. Am I right?"

"Depends on the size of the buck," Bevins said. "I got a hunch this is a big one." He got out of the jeep. "And I wanted to be a captain. You don't know how much I wanted to be a captain. . . C'mon, Pete. We can always join the Navy; they'll take anybody."

They got into the weapons carrier. Yarnall drove. He kept

looking at Pete, shaking his head in a kind of baffled wonderment. They were well on the way to town before he spoke.

"Dunno who trained you, Lieutenant," he said. "Whoever it was done a lousy job. Me, I'd've hammered a couple of things in your head as soon's I taught you the hand salute. You can't soldier without 'em. It's a little late, but you might as well learn 'em.

"Number One: Don't buck the Army system! If it blocks you, outflank it. There's a way around everything and everybody. All you got to do is find it. Tear in, head on, with your neck bowed—right or wrong—and you'll end up busted. Every damn time. Y'got that?"

"The hard way," Pete said.

"Here's Number Two," Yarnall said. "In the Army, we got a deal called a 'strategic withdrawal.' You don't only use it in combat. You use it all the time. Whenever you find yourself up against superior forces, make a strategic withdrawal.

"It ain't a retreat, you ain't licked. You back up, you get more muscle, you tackle it again, maybe a different way—you're still alive, you're still in the fight, see? But stay in there, outmanned and outgunned, and there ain't nothing you can get but clobbered. You lose the fight every damn time!"

"I stayed in," Pete said. "I lost the fight."

"Now you got it," Yarnall said. "Hang onto it and maybe some day you'll learn to soldier."

He stopped at a service station, used a telephone, and got back behind the wheel. He finally stopped again on a little-used road on the outskirts of King City where there was only a scattering of houses. A block ahead of them was a long low building. There was no sign on it, but it looked like a warehouse. Yarnall said it was their objective.

"We're busting in," he said. "There's a door in the back, Lieutenant"—to Bevins—"cover it and grab anything that comes out. We'll hit it from the front. Look sharp and step lively. There'll be a tussle, maybe a gun or two. Okay?"

Bevins said, "Give me time to get there."

They gave him time. Then Pete and Yarnall left the weapons carrier. They turned down a driveway that ran the length of the building. There was a loading platform at the far end, a door halfway down. The door was closed. Yarnall broke into a trot.

"Hard and fast," he said.

He was at a full run when he reached the door. His hand

flipped the knob, his shoulder hit the wood, and the door smashed open. He was through, still running, and Pete was only a stride behind.

They were in a rough sort of office, long and wide. There were chairs, a desk, a filing case, a stack of crates and boxes—and three men. A small one sat at the desk, a heavily built one stood in an inner doorway, a dark one used a chair. They were all civilians.

Yarnall picked the big one in the inner doorway, going for him without a pause. Startled or not, the big man knew a fight when he saw it, and met the lunge, driving forward with clubbing fists.

Pete took the tougher of the two who were left—the slender dark one, possibly a Mexican; going in with all he had, he swung a hard right, missed, and tangled with the man—tangled, he found, with barbed wire. Slender or not, the dark man had a lithe and vicious strength.

The man at the desk squealed. He was on his feet, short, plump, white-haired. The way to the outer door was blocked by Yarnall and the big man. He hopped away from the desk and vanished through the inner door. No way to stop him. Yarnall and Pete had all they could handle.

Yarnall's going was very rough. The big man was a powerhouse and he was thick-skulled. They were on the floor, a twisting, rolling scramble of arms and legs.

Pete almost lost an eye to the dark man's hooked, clawing fingers; he caught a driving knee on his hip; he jerked away from rigid fingers seeking his nostrils. A hard right found the dark, snarling face, high; a left missed.

They closed and tripped and fell. Pete couldn't hold the twisting, spitting, scratching devil. He squirmed from under Pete. When he got to his feet, he was in a spring-kneed crouch, an open switchblade knife in his hand.

The blade was death, and Pete knew it. It was held like a sword, belt high, arm coiled—held by a man who knew how to use it. And Pete was afraid.

He watched the knife like a bird watching a snake; he got to his feet. His hands were empty; there was no weapon near. And the dark man stalked him, slowly on the balls of his feet, poised.

Pete backed away, his mind blind in that moment. The first strike came, a flashing cut from left to right. Pete jerked away. A white-hot iron crossed his chest.

It was only a light cut. It opened his shirt from pocket to pocket and let blood flow from a deep scratch. And it saved Pete's life. When he felt the blade, he lost his fear. He knew how to fight a knife. The Army had spent long hours teaching him.

When the blade came again—this time a rapier thrust—he was ready. He twisted around the knife, outside; his hands snapped down and closed on the knife hand, his thumbs to the back. He lifted the knife hand high, throwing it over, whipping it down. The dark man's arm snapped. He screamed like a child.

Pete used his fists then, like hammers, mercilessly, and in a moment beat the man senseless. When he dropped, Pete turned quickly. Yarnall and the big man were still on the floor. Each had a pair of hands on the other's throat, Yarnall's inside, having a little the better of it.

Pete took a long stride and kicked the big man in the back of the head. No more was needed. Yarnall got up, swearing.

"I had the guy! Had him cold! I didn't need—" He stared at Pete's blood-soaked shirt, sobering instantly. "A shiv," he said. "You hurt?"

"A near miss," Pete said.

Yarnall had to see for himself. Then he looked at the knife, and at the dark man's twisted forearm. His eyes came back to Pete, a grin building in them.

"Kind of hell on wheels, ain't you?"

Pete felt eight feet tall.

And they heard the sound of far off sirens. Yarnall swore. "The other guy—" He lunged for the inner doorway. Halfway through it, he saw Bevins coming down the dim interior of the warehouse with the third man. The plump little man was walking on tiptoes in front of Bevins, one arm out of sight behind him.

"Popped out the back," Bevins said. "Want him?"

"Yeah, man!" Yarnall said. "He's Number One." He caught the plump man by the coat front. "Watch the other two. What I got to do ain't a fit sight for officers and gentlemen."

He hustled the small man back into the warehouse. Pete heard Yarnall's voice snarling, as ugly as a voice could be. He heard the Smack! Smack! Smack! of a hard hand beating a face. The beating didn't stop until a thin voice moaned, then cried, then squealed for mercy.

The sirens whooped in the drive outside, then tires wailed and doors slammed.

Six men poured into the room, four in uniform, two not. Pete's heart dropped to his socks. The big man with the black brows and heavy jaw, wearing the oak leaf, was Hulshof, the provost marshal at Camp Clements—the boss of MP. He had three noncom MP's with him. The civilians were city police.

Pete and Bevins snapped to attention. Hulshof's eyes were furious.

"Where's Yarnall?" he snapped.

Yarnall said, "Here, sir."

He came into the room, shoving the plump little man ahead of him. The round face was swollen, bruised, and streaked with tears. Yarnall held him by the back of the neck and gave Major Hulshof an easy grin.

"Like I told you on the phone sir," he said, "we had the range on a nest of thieves. Butterball, here"—he rattled the plump little man—"is the lad who's been buying the stuff we've been missing from the supply depot. Got a lot of it stacked out back. Now he's just beggin' for a chance to tell us who was the head thief of the bunch who stole it. Ain't that so, Butterball?"

"Yes—yes, I'll tell you."

"Give us the name, loud and clear."

"S-Sergeant Kennedy."

Dear Anne: Did you know enlisted men will tell a noncom they know and trust things they never tell an officer? It's a fact. A pair of honest GI's in the quartermaster depot knew a little and guessed more. It took a man like Yarnall to get it out of them.

And it blew the whistle on Kennedy. Wirth sang like a bird. Kennedy killed Shirley Dolan. Why? She was his girl, almost his wife, and she knew about his thieving. He tried to give her the brush for a girl he liked better, she threatened to talk, he slugged her—and that's the way a murder happens.

Major Hulshof isn't too happy with us. It seems he and his people were also investigating Kennedy and Wirth and we grabbed the brass ring one step ahead of them. I put together Kennedy's lie-without-reason and the theft of the supplies, and Yarnall did the rest. He gives me all the credit. He says I'll need it. In that he's right. Your Happy Beaver still has his misdeeds to account for—the Army exacts punishment for each crime.

The office of Maj. Gen. Daniel B. Sisson was large, but it was

crowded the next morning. Colonel McVey and Major Hulshof were there. Yarnall was there. Pvt. Alan Pomeroy, his head a turban of bandages, stood between Pete Cameron and Hugh Bevins. The general sat at his desk, cold-eyed, implacable. Now he looked up from the papers he held in his hands.

"Private Pomeroy."

Alan Pomeroy stiffened. "Yes, sir?"

"You've been cleared of the charge of murder," the general said. "As recompense for being unjustly accused, I'm recommending a ten-day leave for you, to begin immediately. Upon your return to duty, you will answer for your conduct at your trial. The charges are: striking a noncommissioned officer, using foul language, brawling and disgracing yourself and the uniform. You will suffer such punishment as your commanding officer may deem just and advisable. Is that clear, private?"

"Yes—yes, sir."

"Then you may go."

Pomeroy stood fast.

"Well?" the general asked.

"I'd like to stay, sir," Pomeroy said. "I'd like to hear what kind of a deal Lieutenant Cameron gets, sir. I dunno; maybe I'll have to blow my top again."

"You think well of Lieutenant Cameron?"

"Do I?" Pomeroy said. "Look what he done for me! Saved my neck, didn't he? A lousy buck private. All he got out of it was grief. But he didn't quit. He—" Pomeroy took a deep breath. "Look, sir, he's the best damn officer in this man's army—and that's from a guy that knows!"

"A high opinion"—the general's eyes remained cold—"not shared, unfortunately, by his superiors. Stay, then." He put Pomeroy's paper aside. After a moment he said, "Sergeant Kennedy, Corporal Wirth, and others will be charged with murder and other crimes and tried before a military court. Their treatment and punishment, if found guilty, will be in accordance with the military code."

His eyes leveled on Pete Cameron. "I'd like an opinion from you, Lieutenant. Would you say that Private Pomeroy received just treatment?"

"I would, sir."

"Under military law?"

"Yes, sir."

"How was that possible?"

"Sir, I—"

Pete set his jaws hard. This, he knew, was the moment for Yarnall's "strategic withdrawal." The general had opened the issue again—was justice possible under military law? Pete had said no before, and what had changed? Nothing basic. And when he looked at the avenues of withdrawal, he found them closed. A man named Pete Cameron blocked each way.

"It was possible, sir," he said, "because Sergeant Yarnall and I were able to prove Kennedy and Wirth were lying, which, in effect, proved the defendant innocent."

"That is correct," the general said.

He had the answer he'd wanted—the issue was still open. Nothing in his manner changed. His gray eyes were still impersonal and cold. He put the papers on his desk and crossed his hands.

"In fairness to the Court," he said, "I must tell you this. Colonel McVey, the presiding officer, came to me a full day before you did—a full day, Lieutenant—to say he felt there was a real possibility that Kennedy and Wirth were lying. Since a verdict of guilty would be based on their testimony, he suggested a thorough investigation of them be made. And since we hold a man is innocent of any crime—and perjury is a crime—innocent until proved guilty, we felt the trial must be continued and their testimony accepted as true and valid until we had evidence to the contrary." He paused for a moment. "Does that indicate to you that Colonel McVey was prejudiced against the defendant, Lieutenant?"

"No, sir." Pete faced the colonel. "My apologies, sir."

The colonel's head tipped in a cool nod.

"Major Hulshof," the general said, "made the investigation at my orders. Kennedy and Wirth serve in his command. He gave them the same scrutiny and treatment he would give to men in any other command. He reached the same conclusion you did, Lieutenant, and a little before. Unfortunately, however, his position does not permit him to use Sergeant Yarnall's method of extracting a confession. He was searching for a more legitimate means when you and the sergeant acted."

Pete was sweating now. Plainly, nothing he had done had been necessary. The Army methods, then, had proved fit and capable. And where did that leave Pete Cameron?

"I was wrong, sir," Pete said. "In the case of Pomeroy, the defendant was fully protected under military law."

"In the case of Pomeroy," the general said slowly. "Does that imply that you feel justice is not served in every case under military law, Lieutenant?"

"It does, sir." Pete said.

"And I agree," the general said. He paused, looking at Pete. A relentless man, a rifle of a man. In a moment he said, "Are you surprised that I agree, Lieutenant?"

"Yes—yes, sir," Pete said.

"And that," the general said, "implies you felt me to be a man with a closed mind—if not stupid, at least not intelligent. Because, Lieutenant, no responsible officer can deny our system has certain inherent weaknesses—lack of legal training in the members of the board, differences of rank, the requirements of military discipline, to name a few. I like to feel that I am a responsible officer. I resent even an implication that I'm not."

"Sir, I didn't mean—"

"Let me ask you this, Lieutenant," the general said. "If not our way, what alternative? Keep in mind that service in uniform is a unique way of life. Our problems are separate and distinct from those of civilian life, our needs are often peculiar to us alone. Would you suggest a civilian court be attached to every company—how many would we need? Would their lack of knowledge of our special requirements be less harmful than our lack of legal training? Would not just as many injustices be done?"

"Yes. I—I guess so, sir."

"I'll have a positive answer, Lieutenant."

"The answer is yes, sir."

"Should we recruit and train," the general asked, "enough graduate law students to serve our every need? One to each company would mean many thousands. Where would we find them? What schools would train them? And if we had them, would they be a practical addition to the services or would they be an overwhelming burden to us and to the taxpayer?"

"It wouldn't make sense, sir."

"An alternative, Lieutenant. Offer one."

"I—I haven't any, sir."

"Nor does anyone else," the general said. "Poor as you may feel our system is, we have yet to find one that would serve our purposes with a fraction of our present efficiency. Do you agree?"

"I agree, sir."

"Good," the general said. "Military law has come a long way from the drumhead, Lieutenant. Changes are constantly made, methods are improved, new safeguards are developed. I am confident we will stay at least abreast of any other means of justice. Confident, because there are men like Colonel McVey—impartial, fair, and intelligent—on almost every board. And because there are men like you, Lieutenant, who will fight, if not with discretion, at least with every means available to protect the rights of a man who stands accused."

"Yes, sir," Pete said.

The general lifted his papers. "I've written a report on your conduct during this trial, Lieutenant. As you know, it will be attached to your record to follow you wherever you go while in the service. It reads, in part:

"This officer has shown himself to be emotionally immature. He gave himself to extreme anger. In times of stress his judgment was poor. He seemed unwilling to admit higher authority or to comply with regulations."

The general looked up. "There is also a list of specific charges to be acted upon by your commanding officer. Do you wish to protest?"

"No, sir."

Paper clips, Pete thought. With a report like that on my record I'll be counting paper clips at the North Pole from now until the ice thaws. I've had it.

"There are also," the general said, "certain recommendations. Again, in part: 'However, this officer has shown an integrity, a courage, a complete devotion to duty seldom equaled in my experience. I urge his immediate and rapid promotion.'"

Dear Anne: That's the Army—reward for service, punishment for disservice. Well, Happy Beaver's learning—learning it takes a long time to become a soldier. With luck, one day I'll get there.

"Q"



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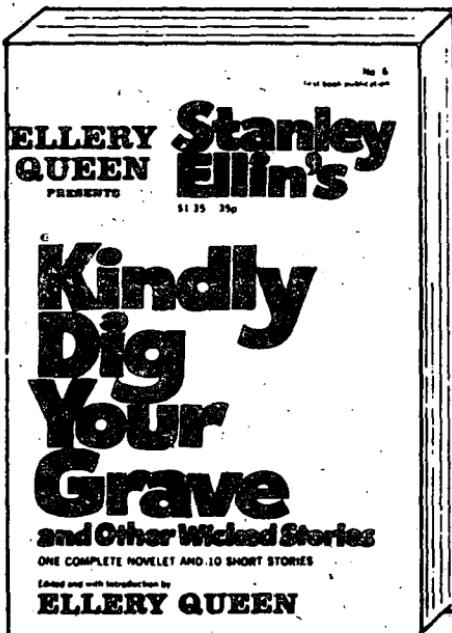
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